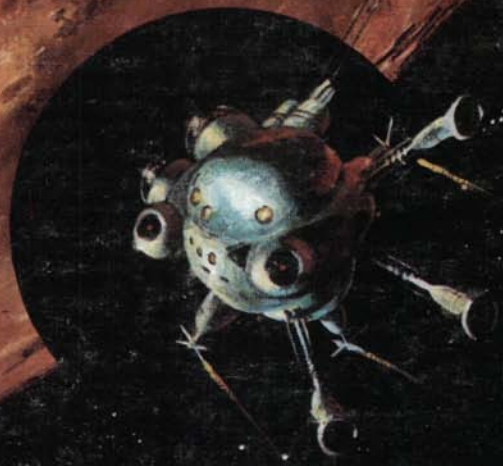
June, 1970 60¢ MAC

Galaxy

MAGAZINE

SCIENCE FICTION



MAYER • SILVERBERG • BUDRYS

THE PLAYER AT YELLOW SILENCE
Carl Jacobi

THE MOON OF THIN REALITY
Duncan Lunan

OUT OF MINDSHOT
John Brunner

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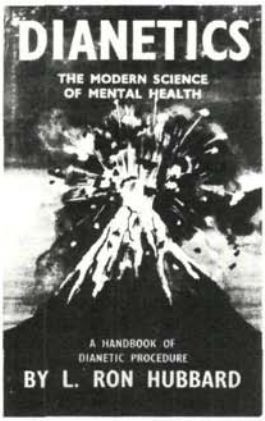
Whatever happened to DIANETICS?



In May 1950, a brilliant American writer, philosopher and Scientist shattered forever the myths and barriers surrounding the unknown territory of the Human Mind.

L. Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* struck the English-speaking world like a thunderbolt. This best selling book heralded the breakthrough sought by Man for over 2000 years, the discovery and identification of the *source* of psychosomatic ills, human aberration, unhappy interpersonal relationships and the technique to eradicate it!

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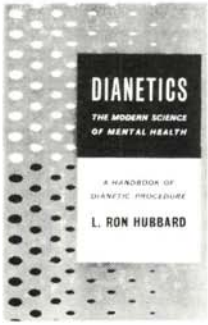

DIANETICS IN 1950

Dianetics was first announced to the public in a popular science fiction magazine in 1950. Without formal training or an organization, the superior technology in the first book made Dianetics tremendously popular. Informal groups mushroomed all over the country and hundreds of thousands actively applied Dianetic techniques with amazing results.

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L. Ron Hubbard continued his research to improve the already excellent results from Dianetic technology and went far beyond. He created training methods far superior to existing systems and founded an organization to service the huge demand for the first truly workable technology of the human mind.

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Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION

MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

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I WILL FEAR NO EVIL

Read that any way you like. Taste it, smell it, savor it and say it. Then clamp your teeth on it and hang on. Make up your mind that you've just promised to brace most of what is constantly around us, often masquerading as good—and what pursues us from the past and rains on us from all foreseeable tomorrows.

Evil.

Explore it. *Chaq'un à son goût.* Your evil may not be my evil but there's enough to go around. Most of us have at one time or another been conditioned to beware of no-nos ranging from sex to sacraments, youth to age, innocence to wisdom, love to hate, fresh air to pollution and birth to death. Inclusive.

I have no idea of whether Robert A. Heinlein began his latest work—first to appear in print in the next issue of *GALAXY*—with its title: I WILL FEAR NO EVIL. But the book is a fearless book. It is also an impossible book—in the sense that many of today's scientific realities were once "impossible."

Here is a novel that delivers, page by page, the thundering promise of its title. Mr. Heinlein, I am convinced, fears no evil. I like to think of myself as reasonably inured to the standard shivers but I found myself even more so after turning the last page. Don't miss that feeling. It's a good one.

Try it this way: I Will Fear *NO* Evil. Then imagine a sometimes boisterous, sometimes sedate but always lively and lusty romp through tomorrow's medical headlines, scare stories of crime, violence, polarization and joy peddlers—and through the secret tunnels of your mind where fear and evil may lurk side by side, sometimes unexpectedly. And get ready for some surprising laughs and equally surprising mental acrobatics.

If fear of evil is the strength of evil, this new work by Heinline is magnificent. If one of the functions of science fiction is to provide insights into pending as well as current realities, then I WILL FEAR NO EVIL is a science-fiction masterpiece.

You may or may not say to yourself—as I did while reading—that not even Heinlein can do what he is doing, write what he is writing, say what he is saying and make you go along with him. But make you go along with him he does.

And you will fear less evil.

—JAKOBSSON

I WILL FEAR NO EVIL, by Robert A. Heinlein

Probably the healthiest, boldest, most entertaining and pertinent imaginative writing of the year! *GALAXY* is proud to bring you this superbly evocative novel—one, surely, that could have been told only in science fiction.

Starting in the next issue!

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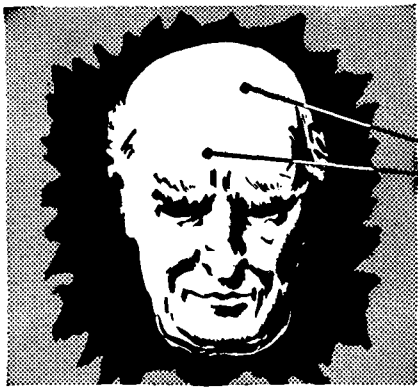

STRANGE things happen here!

The Dark Continents of Your Mind

DO YOU struggle for balance? Are you forever trying to maintain *energy*, *enthusiasm* and the *will to do?* Do your personality and power of accomplishment ebb and flow—like a stream controlled by some unseen valve? Deep within you are minute organisms. From their function spring your emotions. They govern your *creative ideas* and *moods*—yes, even your enjoyment of life. Once they were thought to be the mysterious seat of the soul—and to be left unexplored. Now cast aside superstition and learn to direct intelligently these *powers of self*.

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THE PLAYER AT YELLOW SILENCE

CARL JACOBI

Unconquerable man meets unbeatable alien—in a match for human souls!

HE CAME out of nowhere like a summer storm and like thunder he went bowling down the fairways, breaking record after record. A gallery materialized about him, though this was no tournament, and word flew ahead into the clubhouse that an unknown marvel was burning up the course.

Someone recalled his name from the register: Forbes—Joseph Forbes. But nobody had seen him before.

On the thirteenth, a 1,325-yard hole, with a dogleg to the right, he took a number-five trajectory-iron and, after a moment's gaze through the telescopic, lofted his shot over a stand of cedars. He made an easy birdie. On the fifteenth it was thought he was too short, but the automated ball rolled down the incline and trickled across the green to drop into the cup—for an ace. He was 58 at the end of the second nine. Though the day was hot and humid, he looked fresh as a daisy.

I called the newspapers myself. As top pro at Yellow Silence I thought I owed it to the press boys to put them on to a good thing. Joseph Forbes was sitting in a fan-back chair on the clubhouse veranda when the sports writers arrived. He answered their questions in a quiet abstract manner, as if he were thinking of something else.

"No, I can't recall that I ever

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made an ace before. Yes, I like the Yellow Silence course very much."

There was a melodious quality to his voice that made me think of distant cattle bells in the summer dusk.

One of the newsmen edged closer. "And what do you think of the Yansis, Mr. Forbes?"

Now *there* was a stupid question to put to a player. There are no Yansis courses in Australasia or in any other part of Earth, for that matter. Yansis don't go in for self-enjoyment. But ever since their "migration" from the Monoceros galaxy in '84 they have attempted, bit by bit, to take over this planet.

It was the prize case of infiltration and, as we know, it very nearly succeeded. When they first arrived in their spaceships they were so benign in manner and appearance nothing suspicious was thought about them. They seemed the epitome of friendship.

But you know the terrible struggle that followed. For twenty years now, since their defeat and retreat to their antipodes stronghold, they have been content to remain on earth and lick their wounds, biding their time. Now, day by day, they are becoming bolder again.

Nevertheless it was a stupid question to put to a player.

Whatever he thought, Forbes made no reply.

NEXT day the stranger showed definitely that he was no fluke. In a driving rain, in slicker jacket and waterproof cap, he went around the upper eighteen in fifty-nine. And, mark you, Yellow Silence is no easy course. Laid out in what formerly was a Chippewa reservation, it presents a labyrinth of magnetic traps, fairway warps and dimensional checkmates that all but confuse the average player.

The evening papers were out when I got back to the clubhouse. The sports pages were full of the man. There was grimmer news too. The papers bristled with war rumors. Demands, warnings, threats on both sides. Political tempers were at the breaking point. War was imminent, the papers said. It was only a matter of time.

About five o'clock of that same day what threatened to be major tragedy occurred in the clubhouse. Two robot caddies carried in a young girl who had been run down by a speed maniac as he roared out of the parking area. Her face was white as wood ash and there was a terrible wound on her temple where the skull was all but crushed in. We stood around helplessly with that feeling of awe that sweeps over one when confronted by sudden disaster. The ambulance doctor finished his examination.

"She's gone," he said.

And then the crowd parted a little as Forbes pushed his way

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through and bent over the silent figure.

He gazed into her eyes for a long moment. He drew from his pocket a small pyxis with a hinged cover. Inside was a miniature panel of crystal keys and what appeared to be a minute oval of silver tape that whirled rapidly. His fingers touched one of the keys, then moved across to drift over the girl's face. The tape slowed, then sped faster. A soft hum issued from the box.

Moments later a flush entered the pallid flesh. One of the eyelids fluttered almost imperceptibly. Then her lids moved and she sat up with a groan while the ambulance doctor stared as if he had seen a ghost.

The wound on her temple seemed to fade away.

Without any trouble the newspapers made a story out of that, too, and almost overnight Forbes became a legend. His easy stance and supple gait were watched with envy and his beautiful electronic clubs were examined and stared at. Quiet and unassuming, he seemed to possess a subtle magnetism that attracted friends instantly.

But it was several weeks before he played again. Meanwhile he drifted in and out of the clubhouse, sitting by the window, staring out over the course. Then, two days before the Trans-Federatal was scheduled to open at Yellow Silence, he joined a threesome of Tony Loretto, Chad Hartridge and Dick Benbow who had come ahead on their tournament tour to try out the Silence course. Loretto was top pro in the Federated States and Hartridge and Benbow had grabbed first and second winnings in the Matto Grosso Open earlier in the year. Their disgust was evident as they left the eighteenth and compared scorecards.

"The man's a wizard," Loretto said. "He didn't miss a putt."

The summer wore on. With the tournament coming on and with the accompanying end-season crowds, I was kept pretty busy those hot days of August. As a matter of fact I didn't see much of Forbes again until the Carewe incident took place.

You might say Julian Carewe was the father of Yellow Silence. He was responsible for getting the land grant from the government and he had designed and laid out the course. Carewe had been a "Three star" player himself until he had contracted Paldring's Disease which had left him confined to a wheelchair.

He had his wheelchair drawn up beside the settee occupied by Forbes when I entered the clubhouse lounge toward the close of what had been a blazing, humid day. The two men appeared to be in animated discussion. Carewe was talking earnestly and from time to time pointed to his useless legs.

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I chose a chair in the corner of the room and picked up a magazine. From time to time my eyes drifted across the room toward the two men. Carewe seemed to be pleading with Forbes in an argumentative sort of way.

Presently Forbes nodded, reached into his pocket and drew out that same small box. Even at that distance I could see what appeared to be cuneiform writing on its outer surface. He moved a small dial in the box, lifted a tiny staff and proceeded to run it back and forth over Carewe's calf and thighs. A light flickered in the box —red, then green. Presently he restored the box to his pocket, rose and walked away.

Carewe sat in his wheelchair, an expression of puzzlement on his face. An instant later he braced his hands on the armrests and clutched there a moment. His feet came down to support him; he took a tentative step.

And then he was walking across the lounge floor, step by step to the veranda.

NEXT day the club was abuzz with Carewe's miraculous recovery. That it was complete was attested by his playing around the practice nine and doing it without aid of any kind. Color entered his face, a smile supplanted his usual scowl and his air of confidence returned. As for me, I was so disturbed by what I had seen I almost forgot about the business-and-membership banquet scheduled for the following night. I planned to show a number of instruction slides on the handling of the new double-mashie which had been approved for tournament play by the NGA.

The dinner was the usual affair. A financial report was read and an election of officers was held.

Saved for the last was the eulogizing of this man called Forbes and his shattering of course records.

But then, like an electric charge passing across the tables, came the whispered rumor: Forbes was an alien. An undesirable. Even now he was under security investigation in Federation City.

In normal times, of course, such gossip would have been relegated to the scrap-heap where it belonged. But these weren't normal times. These were days of planetary patriotism and fear-charged suspicion. The Yansis were on the verge of war. The Yansis were known to have a highly technocratic culture on their home planet. Perhaps they had evolved a method whereby their individual identity could be hidden beyond visual detection.

It's a damned shame, I thought. The man is no more an alien than I am. Yet even I had to admit there was an oddness about him that puzzled me.

Nor was my curiosity relieved

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the next night when I returned to the clubhouse to do some remodeling work. I had promised to give a member's trajectory-wood my personal attention and to have it ready the next morning. Climbing the veranda steps, I saw Forbes sitting in the gloom.

"Hullo," I said. "It's a fine night."

He answered and I passed on into the clubhouse. I found the club to be repaired, got some sandpaper and a bolin-screwdriver and went to work. Perhaps five minutes passed; then the sound of footsteps came through the open window. In the glow of light from within Forbes passed by, carrying his bag.

I laid down the club and made my way down the corridor to the veranda in time to see a shadowy figure step onto the first tee. He bent down, placed something on the turf; not an ordinary ball but a yellowish ovoid that gleamed with a kind of phosphorescence of its own.

As if he were doing the most ordinary thing in the world, he addressed the ball, drove it into the pitch-blackness of the fairway. An arching streak of orange marked the passage of the ball as if some of its radiant pigment had embossed its path against the night sky. As if it were some kind of signal to the stars above.

Forbes picked up his bag of clubs and strode off in the direc-

Ballantine Books

PURSUED by the horrors of DDT and pesticide-infected foods (evoked by the recent environmental teach-in), May is the month when normally cerebral types will have found themselves digging, raking and planting a mess of vegetable seeds, which, by God, will be organically grown. (Hint No. 1: Household Note for City Dwellers—a fork makes a great rake for those pots of herbs.) Before you become entirely exhausted by all this unaccustomed physical activity, better go out and buy some good reading matter to while away the hours of recuperation you can look forward to. (Hint No. 2: Cold beer helps while the activity is going on.) (Hint No. 3: Chivas Regal is better for relaxing stiff muscles while recuperating.)

•

BOOKS TO BUY

A THUNDER OF STARS, Dan Morgan and John Kippax. Science fiction in the grand old space-operatic tradition—this one the first in a projected series. Downright nostalgic in these days of upside-down type etcetera. (Hint No. 4: Take up yoga. That way you can read standing on your head. Or, for the medallion effect, do a series of cartwheels. Have a friend running steadily alongside holding

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the book for you to read. But however you do it, read. If that doesn't prove we're enthusiasts, Harlan, God knows what will.)

•

DREAM QUEST OF UNKNOWN KADATH, H.P. Lovecraft—Introduction by Lin Carter. For some reason, Lovecraft is getting to be a big underground author. Not his Cthulhu Mythos so much as the undefined world of Kadath. Or perhaps incomplete would be a better word, for Lovecraft's writing certainly never lacked definition. His imagery is brilliantly graphic. In addition to the lead novelette, DREAM QUEST contains five stories from his early Dunsanian period. There appears to be a distinct connection in reading interests between adult fantasy, the occult, back-to-nature buffism and conservation. Which could create some pretty queer situations. Picture Ron Regan standing on his head chewing Granola while reading LORD OF THE RINGS. Now that **could** win him votes.

(HINT NO. 5: The better to prepare all those delicious organically homegrown veg which you'll be harvesting, you can brush up on your cooking with our special for May, THE MAFIA COOKBOOK, by one who calls himself Joe Cipolla.) (Hint No. 6: Italian for onion.) Oy vey. BB

tion of the first hole. I went down the veranda steps and followed.

The arching streak of light remained over the fairway like a glowing ribbon. And when I approached the green the glow combined with the gleaming ball to illumine a wide area. I moved unseen into a tree's shadow and there I watched him select a putter and silently tap the ball into the cup. He seemed to be playing idly, to be waiting for something.

The second hole was a repetition of the first.

But at the third hole Forbes opened a zippered compartment of his bag and drew out a collapsible rod with tripod legs. He also took out a small quadrant with a double row of coronium keys. He placed the quadrant next to the rod and began to tune the instrument.

Slowly a mist flowed outward from the pelan, rising to form a vague screen-like curtain between the tree boles. A face began to take form there.

It was the face of a patriarch. The white hair fell away from the crown of the head and the eyes, under heavy brows, seemed to glitter like shards of shiny metal. It spoke but the voice was pitched too low in the sonic scale for me to understand.

"They are basically good, needing only guidance," Forbes said finally. "With your permission I will stay longer."

With that, the mist-screen

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seemed to melt away. Forbes returned the quadrant and the collapsible rod to his bag and headed back toward the clubhouse.

IN THE weeks that followed interest in war news preempted all other activity. An ultimatum had been delivered by the Yansis to Federation City, following what they declared to be an insulting diplomatic incident. Now they were insisting on more demands. Wherever you went people stood in groups, discussing the situation. War was inevitable, they said. Labor tunnels were doubly guarded with security restrictions. Fallout compartments were serviced. Automated trunkways were turned back to manual roads and waystations were camouflaged. Federation City prepared to move underground.

The newspapers had a field day, going all-out in their vilification of the Yansis. The high-speed draft began to take men of military age and presently you noticed it on the course, older men making up a greater percentage of the players.

In the midst of all this the sports pages carried one bit of news that had nothing to do with the threatened conflict. The old Southview course, twenty miles down the trunkway from Yellow Silence, was being renovated and scheduled to reopen as a private links under the new name of Tranquillity Heights. Funny name for a course I thought. And then did a double take when I read the name of the promoter—Joseph Forbes.

A FEW days later I drove over to give the place the once-over. I had expected temporary greens, winter rules and hazards in the process of construction. Instead I found one of the most beautifully laid-out courses I had ever seen: the greens composed of the new magnetic silver-bent; the water-hazard a mirror-like lake that sparkled in the sunlight and fairways tailored to perfection.

There were lattice bridges over picturesque streams, robotic caddies waiting at the first tee and an inviting plastic and glass clubhouse with an automatic ramp leading up from the playing level. A tremendous amount of work had been put on the course and it seemed incredible that it could have been completed in so short a time.

My presence was spotted. The door to the clubhouse opened and Forbes came down the ramp to meet me.

"Welcome to Tranquillity Heights," he said. "Do you want to play a round?"

I shook my head.

"What's that thing?"

I pointed to a narrow concrete structure with a metal antenna above it.

"It's a Balance-beam. Contestants pass through it and are evened-up to a common denomina-

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tor of skill, strength and psychological endurance. Come along and meet my assistants."

Forbes' assistants sat about a long table in a clubhouse second-floor room, eating their meal. Forbes called names. Each man nodded as his was spoken. The wine—pre-Atomic 44, I guessed—was of excellent quality. Forbes drank from a goblet.

Presently I voiced a question: "You've quite an investment here. Do you expect to realize a profit?"

"The greatest profit in the world," he said. "The profit of peace."

"I don't understand."

He was silent a moment.

"Did it ever occur to you to wonder why a man plays a relatively simple contest, bolstered with only minor technological advancements? Principally because golf is about the last participation sport. Most others have lapsed into spectator contests. You know that with the coming of com-automation and the subsequent increase of leisure, nonprofessional physical ability has fallen out of fashion. Hampton's *Second Cycle of Life* was found to rest upon a minimum of cardiac strain."

"So?"

"So the elemental conflict—war. An outgrowth of tribal struggle and in turn a development of individual or family grievance. Today the Yansis are our enemies, cloaked in fear and suspicion. I propose to reduce the differences—between."

"Are you trying to tell me you expect to settle the conflict between us and the Yansis by such a simple and unsophisticated device?" I said.

"Yes."

"It'll never work," I said. "There's too much at stake."

"I think it will. Each of the factions has been contacted and has agreed to send players. It won't make any difference if they choose professional athletes or not. Once they pass the beam they will be at the same level."

He broke off.

Outside two copters had settled down before the clubhouse entrance and a dozen or more figures stepped out. They were Yansis. Their wafer skulls were concealed by blue turbans and their violet eyes were hidden behind dark glasses.

Stiff as sticks, they marched up the ramp and strode into the lobby where they were met by Forbes.

I nodded goodbye and passed outside.

But as I headed down the trunkway a question hammered at me. Why had there been no security watch over the Yansis representatives? With the two races at sword's points—it seemed strange that no precautions had been taken by either side.

I drove down the trunkway and the farmland of early Autumn

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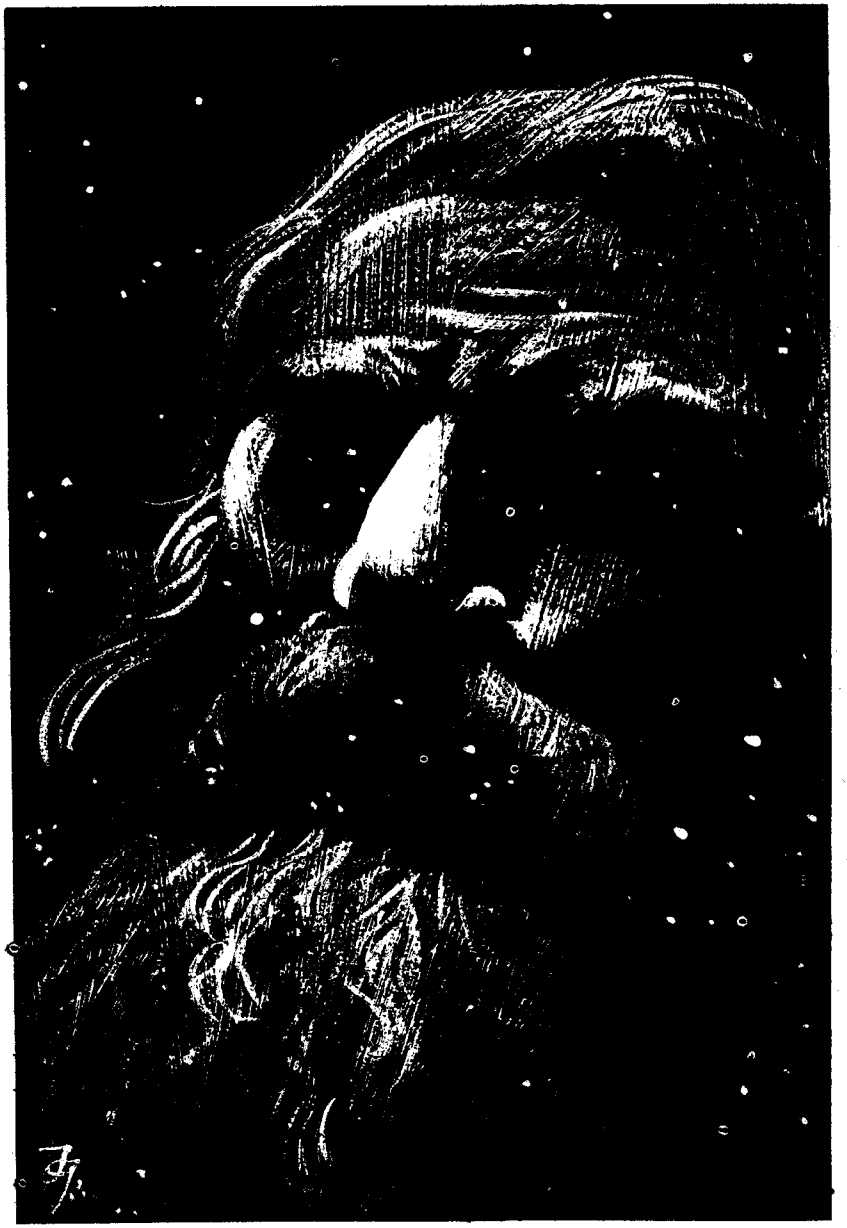

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stretched away on all sides. Or was it farmland? The fields seemed to be lying fallow, untilled. Nor were any farmhouses in evidence. Abruptly it struck me that I had not passed a single car, that the road was in fact deserted.

Ten minutes later I was staring, stunned, at the sign above the gate. I was back where I had started.

A figure stepped out of the shoulder bushes and leaned in the car window. It was Benjamin, one of Forbes' assistants.

"It's all right," he said. "We didn't know it was you. Thought you were still on the course."

"I must have taken the wrong turn," I said. "But I don't remem—"

"It's all right. Just keep going straight down the trunkway."

He waved me on.

THE newspapers carried nothing about the impending tournament at Tranquillity but rumors about the Yansis continued. In their Australasian lair they were said to be making ready a weapon a hundred times more frightful than the missle-missle.

Then a new series of events occurred to demand journalistic attention. In twelve cities, on twelve outstanding links, a strange duplication of the phenomenon that had taken place at Yellow Silence transpired. A stranger played with a fantastically low score and in some unorthodox way performed some unusual therapy. What was more important, however, was the society these strangers organized, a national quasi-theology attracting members by the score.

The first chance I got, impelled by curiosity, I drove back to the Heights, arriving in time to see a foursome made up of two of Forbes' assistants and two turbaned Yansis drive for the first hole.

I followed them.

The game ended with the Yansis far in the lead. The aliens were laughing triumphantly as they left the eighteenth hole and made their way back to the clubhouse. I met Forbes on the veranda.

"I want to thank you," he said, "for not betraying my confidence. The press, though, is getting more difficult to hold back."

"The tournament, I take it, is not proving a success."

"Why do you say that?"

"I followed the play today," I said, "and you could have cut the silence with a knife. You can't change antagonism to rivalry."

"You forget all Yansis don't speak our language."

"You could have used a Transladian."

"If they agreed to, yes. So far the tournament is a draw. We're even-up in the number of holes played and the number won."

I thought that over.

"Who plays next?"

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OUT OF MINDSHOT

JOHN BRUNNER

"You're in the country of the deaf—and noise can kill. . ."

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ON AN outcropping ledge of rock Braden paused for a moment, narrowing his eyes against the sun. He glanced back down the dusty trail—not that it really deserved that name, since calling it a trail implied the previous passage of someone or something and there were no visible tracks, just a series of negotiable footholds rising stair-fashion on the face of the hill.

From this level he could still see his car, zebra-striped by the shadow of a tall, branching cactus at the point where the ground started to slant too steeply for wheels to find purchase. But only a smudge of smoke marked his last stopping place, a settlement not so much a town as an accident, a wrinkle in the sandy ribbon of desert time.

Because that, though, was the place where he had realized he had come to the end of his quest, he kept his eyes fixed on the blur of smoke while he sought the cork of his canteen and raised it in a parody of a toast. He sipped the contents economically and stopped before his thirst was satisfied. Water, he reasoned, must be his quarry's chief problem in this arid valley. Ultimately possession of it might become a weapon.

He replaced the canteen in his pack and turned to study the going ahead of him. By now, he calculated, he must be two-thirds of the way to the top. He had hardly expected to find clues indicating he was on the right track—if his deductions were correct he was dealing with someone desperate enough to take every possible precaution—but he was optimistic. If he did not find what he was looking for on this particular hill, there were others beyond which he could explore tomorrow.

After six years of searching, another few days made little difference.

He shouldered the pack and sought the easiest way to go higher. From this point on the rocks grew craggier and there was no sand, for the cold night wind scoured the hard stone clean. Stolidly he scrambled onward, the sun punishing his back and the sweat vanishing from his skin almost before it oozed out of the pores.

After a while he found himself on the edge of a flat space, a miniature plateau about thirty yards across, flanked by a steep drop into the valley and a nearly vertical cliff forty or more feet high. He removed his pack and tossed it over the lip of the level area, then hauled himself up with much panting and cursing. As he bent to reclaim the pack something caught his attention from the corner of his eye.

A stack of rocks did not quite meet the cliff wall. A shadow beyond them looked like the opening of a cave. He saw a speck of bright, artificial color, a fragment of sun caught on a broken bottle.

While he was still staring the quiet voice from behind him said,

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"Put up your hands."

Braden strove mentally to quell the flush of jubilation which spread across his mind with cold contrasting thoughts—ordinary thoughts of fear and surprise. When, compliantly, his arms went up in the air they trembled unnecessarily.

"Turn around," said the quiet voice.

He obeyed and had to repress a start of surprise—how efficiently, he could not be sure, but it was almost certain that his quarry would be preoccupied with alarm at this intrusion, so there was some leeway for uncontrolled reaction. He had expected what pictures had shown him: a pudgy, rather ugly, self-indulgent child. In fact, behind the rifle that was leveled at him over a sheltering rock stood a slim, wiry figure likely to be taller than himself when upright and seeming a good deal tougher.

Though that remains to be decided. . .

For a while the two studied each other: the hunter in plain sight, clad in open shirt, jeans, heavy climbing boots, the quarry almost hidden by the rock so that the rifle was like a symbol for armor. But the bare tanned arms that were visible were lean and muscular and the face under the roughly cropped fair hair was harsh with enmity.

"All right." The quarry gestured with the muzzle of the gun. "You're not armed, I guess. Move away from your pack, though."

NOW that the long-awaited confrontation was upon him, Braden was having trouble controlling his excitement. Doing as he was told, however, he concentrated on simple ideas.

What's all this about? Have I run into a criminal in hiding?

But the next words he heard, uttered in a slow drawl of puzzlement, told him that his precautions were in vain.

"Braden—Daniel Braden, is that right? But I don't know anyone called Braden. And yet you seem to know me."

A headshake. A whitening of the knuckles that still clasped around the stock of the gun. Braden sighed and chose a direct onslaught rather than further prevarication.

"You're not what I expected from your pictures, Lesley."

"What?"

"I thought you'd be fat. You started out fat. But I guess starving in a hole halfway up a mountain—and scrambling up and down that slope every time you need supplies—would take weight off anybody."

Bewilderment was coming to his aid. Uncertain, letting the gun's threatening mouth move to one side, the quarry asked, "Are you somebody who used to know me when?"

Hope, hunger—some kind of craving after human companionship—whatever it was, she moved from behind the protecting rock. Braden studied her critically. She

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was quite naked, which was among the many things he might have expected but hadn't thought about, because after all who was there for at least five miles in any direction to complain? Her fair hair had been slashed merely to keep it out of her eyes and her face was like the rest of her, tanned to a wooden color by the merciless desert sunshine. But the shape was good—square shoulders contrasted with small round breasts and wide feminine hips—and the lessening of the old puppy-fat allowed her fine bone structure to show through.

God damn, she's turned out beautiful!

That thought, welling from the animal level of his being, breached the careful camouflage beyond repair and his mind bloomed like a beacon. The gun snapped back to its former aim.

"You know me," The words were forced out on breath alone, with no voice to drive them.

"Sure I know you," Braden said. "You're Lesley Wolker, and you can read my mind."

"Oh God. Oh God." The sounds died on the bare face of the hill like seeds cast into crevices among stark rock. "How—how—"

"How did I find you?" Braden supplied briskly, much relieved at the girl's obvious terror. "Why, it was pretty simple really. I started with the premise that there should by now be at least one efficient telepath in the United States—and possibly more. It was only logical that with the high level of success obtained from randomly chosen subjects by people like Rhine, someone would have been born who was endowed with the full talent. And such a person— Well, you read Wells's *The Country of the Blind?* Only you're not sighted among the blind. You're in a country of the deaf—and noise can kill."

Lesley's face writhed as though he had put a hot iron to the smooth mound of her belly.

"A person like that would either go insane or run and hide. And in the modern world there aren't many places one can hide. A desert or a mountain seemed to me the only possible places, and if such a person were to be born in the big cities where most of our population is now concentrated, then—short of finding a usable route up to the Canadian backwoods—an area like this one would be the closest and easiest escape hole. I don't know what kind of torment such a person would undergo, but it doesn't take much imagination to figure out that it would be so bad the victim would flee in panic to the nearest lonely spot, without taking time to wonder if later on there would be a chance of moving somewhere else.

"So I took a map and made some measurements—and then I checked the missing persons files in every city where they'd let me get at them and checked those against

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pertinent genealogical tables and —" Braden snapped his fingers. "Five years of that. More than a year, now, asking around in every hole-in-corner town near the areas I'd selected as possibilities. And in that particular one over there—" he pointed in the general direction of the smoke smudge he had toasted earlier—"they told me about a mysterious woman who occasionally comes down from the hills to buy basic foods, always wearing the same overly tight blouse and shorts which are now pretty well in rags. There's something to be said for old-fashioned prejudices. They talk about your legs every time the conversation gets dull—did you know that? Yes, I guess you must know."

He gave her a girn that turned the corners of his mouth into a sketch for horns.

"Also," he concluded, "you must know what it is I came to get you for."

LESLEY'S face had set into a feral mask and the rifle was clutched so tightly that not only her knuckles but half the backs of her hands were white under the sunburn. She uttered a choking gasp and jerked as though to fire.

"One moment," Braden said—and this part of his conversation was one he had rehearsed so many times in his mind he genuinely believed it now. "Are you planning to kill me?"

Lesley gave a violent nod, eyes locked wide open under her sun-bleached lashes.

"But you daren't," Braden said with careful cruelty. "Because you'd know what I was thinking when I died."

He relaxed his mind now and he had a very real fear of death underneath the glacial calm he outwardly affected.

"If you kill me, Lesley, you will feel the bullet, no matter where you put it—unless you hit me in the head and destroy my brain instantly. But I doubt you can do that. I don't see how anyone who can read minds could bear to learn to use a gun so well. You've never felt a slug tear up your belly or fill your lungs with blood but I have. I was out in Viet Nam and I was shot three times. And later I was bayoneted, too. Look inside my head and learn how I remember that. And those were only wounds, Lesley. They weren't death. Death is big and black and final—"

All the time he was talking, soothingly, almost hypnotically, he had been approaching her. Now she regained her presence of mind and advanced the gun as though to skewer him with it.

"You can't use a knife either, Lesley," Braden said in the same flat tone. "Steel in the flesh feels cold and agonizing. You can't use your bare hands because—even though you're probably as strong as I am after climbing up and down

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these rocks—every time you hit me you would feel the blow."

Another step—and another. The outstretched gun was beginning to quiver. The girl's eyes were bright with what he confidently took to be tears.

"You can't give me poison because either it hurts or it takes too long. You can't strangle me while I'm asleep, for fear I'd wake and be so terrified you'd have to give up. So you can't kill me, Lesley. You daren't kill me. Doing something like that would drive you insane. You know what suffering does to you, I'm sure—you must have been around people who were dying, maybe after a traffic accident—"

His thick fingers lanced out and clamped on the barrel of the gun, thrusting it aside where its slugs would whine harmlessly away. For a moment he feared she still had enough guts to struggle with him for possession of it but abruptly she let it go and slapped her hands up to her temples.

Another second and she began to cry.

Contemptuously Braden broke the breech of the gun and spilled the shells in a metal rain over the edge of the plateau. About to whirl the weapon itself around his head and fling it far away from the rocks, he paused.

"I'm not throwing this down the hill in case you think to use it as a club and beat me unconscious, by the way," he said. "There isn't any way you could force me to let go of you now I've tracked you down. You can't torture me or compel me. You see, I've known for a long time that I wouldn't need to come armed against someone like you. I had a very strict and puritanical upbringing. It left me conditioned in a certain fundamental way. Of course, by now you've probably worked out what I'm going to tell you but I'll say it in words just to avoid misunderstandings."

He stared at her piercingly.

"You were a pretty big girl when life became too much for you—seventeen, weren't you, when you vanished from your family and home? So you probably knew the facts of life. And I don't think I need to tell you what a masochist is!"

He raised the rifle and hurled it as far as he could. Dusting his hands, he turned to confront Lesley.

"But a masochist isn't simply someone who likes to be hurt—that's a common error. It's someone who needs to be hurt, and the more he's hurt the better able he is to let go and grab after the gratification that he wants. You can't bear to be near someone who's being hurt, let alone to be hurt yourself. It's going to be an unequal struggle, isn't it?"

Tear-stained, her face rose from the shelter of her hands.

"What do you want from me?" she whispered.

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"You have to ask?" Braden gave a thick triumphant laugh. "Don't try and fool me. You know very well what I want from you. Go on, admit it."

"You—" The first attempt at an answer died in a gasp, and she tried again. "You think that with me to read other people's minds for you you could—"

"Let's hear it. Finish the sentence, baby."

"You could rule the world."

"That's right," Braden agreed. "Or if you went crazy from the pressure—at least I'd have collected enough secrets to buy the men who count. You may be a telepath, sweetheart, but in this area I'm a clairvoyant. And all I have to do now is wait until you see the future the way I do."

IT WAS going to be even easier than he'd expected, he decided as he sat before the small shielded fire at the mouth of the cave Lesley called home. On a stick he was grilling some sausages he had brought with him—one of the things he had figured out in advance was that someone as squeamish as you'd imagine a telepath to be wouldn't eat the flesh of animals.

The point amused him and for a moment he dwelled on the vivid recollection of a slaughterhouse he had once visited. From the rear of the cave a retching sound told him that the thought had had the effect he'd hoped for.

"There, there, baby," he called. "It's just one of these facts of life!"

"Bastard," she said.

"Sticks and stones, sticks and stones—"

Braden snuffed at the sausages and decided they were cooked through. He took slices of bread from a loaf he had brought and made a crude sandwich.

A pushover. A goddamn pushover. Why, he'd never imagined he would overcome her so easily. There she was, lying on the heap of torn blankets which served her for a bed, her wrists and ankles tied and she hadn't uttered a word of protest when he bound her. And that must simply be because when he thought about fetters and bondage something fierce was let loose on the lower levels of his mind, emitting a sort of raw animalistic violence that her sober detachment was vulnerable to. Faced with that kind of reaction all she could do was whimper and hold out her hands for the rope.

Oh, baby, what I'm going to do with you. . .

The memory haunted him all the while he was munching his food. Belly satisfied, he lit a cigarette and relaxed into a contented reverie against the side wall of the cave. In some ways, even if nothing else came of what he had done, it was an achievement to have actualized his favorite fantasy. Tying up a girl with no clothes on, wholly and completely at his mercy—it was

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the other half of his private hell, the one in which he was the victim to be bound. And because he fundamentally resented the deprivation and subservience here implied, no matter how great a thrill it gave him, he yearned for the power that control over a mind-reader would bring him, as though that would set him free from the prison in which his tyrannical father and cynical mother had enclosed him. He remembered those Saturday night encounters when his parents called him in to agree to the total of his week's offenses and to suffer without crying out the lashes that matched the number of them.

He caught himself suddenly. Thinking along those lines was dangerous. With an effort he wrenched his mind back to pleasanter ideas—he pictured a certain building in pre-Castro Havana, where a girl in high black boots with jingling spurs had passed the thong of a whip through her fingers and licked her lips lasciviously, ordering him to cringe toward her foot and kiss her toe . . .

Behind him came a splashing sound and he jolted back to full awareness. He scrambled to his feet. It was no part of his plan to have Lesley foul the pile of blankets with vomit—he had dumped her there for the time being only. Since there was nothing else decently soft to sleep on he proposed to usurp the pile himself and let her sleep on the bare stone floor. A few nights of that and she would be well softened for him.

Although, of course, since she had shown herself to be so weak already. . .

He caught up a brand from the fire and used it for a torch to light his way back into the shallow cave. As he had feared, the thoughts she had picked up from his mind had nauseated Lesley to the point of revulsion. Luckily she had missed the blankets.

He prodded her with his toe.

"Clear it up," he ordered.

Clasping her arms around her body, she looked up at him. "I—I'm *cold*!" she forced out between chattering teeth.

"I don't care," he rasped. "You're going to be a hell of a sight colder. Come on, clear it up before I make you lick it up."

Shuddering, awkward for the bonds on her wrists and the hobbles he had put around her ankles, she got to her feet.

"What—what with?"

"Should I know?" Braden shrugged. "You live here in this pigsty. You must have something to mop messes up with."

"I guess I do," she said tiredly. "Okay, I'll see to it. But you'd better keep your mind on something else if you don't want it to happen again."

"It won't happen again," Braden grunted. "There won't be anything in your belly to bring up, not even water."

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"What?"

"Not until you start doing as I say."

She stared at him in the red light of the brand he held. For a moment her mouth worked but no sound emerged. Then she seemed to crumble in on herself.

"Oh God. . . But I can't do it with my hands tied, can I?"

He started, suspicious of a trick. But her wrists were indeed too closely bound to let her use her hands. He found a ledge to rest his brand on and warily slacked the rope to a distance of a foot or so.

"That's enough," she sighed and headed for the mouth of the cave.

HE DASHED after her, thinking that, even if he himself would not have dared to face the steep hillside in the dark, she who had lived here for years on end might be willing to risk it to get away from him. But she stopped by the screen of piled rock hiding the cave mouth and took from behind it a plastic bucket he had seen earlier and a cheap broom with most of the bristles missing, which she must have bought in the general store of the town where he had heard news of her existence.

He relaxed, letting her go past him back into the cave. Not until he had seen her clear away the mess she had made like a perfect slave, however, did he let himself assume his former confidence.

Why, all I need to do to keep her on the leash is think about things she finds distasteful! I could weaken her past the point of resistance and enjoy myself at the same time. . .

Memories leaped up, not only of the house of ill fame in Havana which he had once patronized, but of another in Los Angeles and another in New York and another and another in every city where his steadfast quest had taken him. A multiple blur of women in provocative scanties and high black leather boots wielding whips arose in the forefront of his mind.

"You wicked boy," Lesley said and raised the broom so that its shadow wavered across the rock wall like the flexible lash of a whip. "You wicked boy—you've sinned, haven't you? Go on, admit it!"

The tone was right, precisely that of his mother when she weekly called him in to face his father and the regular beatings he endured. The manner was right, the words were right—even the fact that the girl who spoke them was a decade younger than his mother and wore no clothes at all could not destroy their impact. From the lowest levels of Braden's mind welled the impulse to obey.

He fought it valiantly but she raised the broom, as once his mother had raised one when he tried to defy parental orders. He cowered down and—in the last instant of coherent thought left to him—re-

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SHIP ME TOMORROW

WILLIAM ROTSLER

When you buy a woman—do you always sell a dream?

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GEORGE ELLISON took his Unicredit card from his worn wallet without looking at it. It was easy to find. Besides it he carried only his Uniworld ident and a scratched up holograph of Janice taken by her father when he was with the General Minerals Mars station survey team.

Ellison's eyes were on the big shiny new Femmikin building across the torn-up street. It was big, but by no means the biggest structure in sprawling Arizona City. But it was the Femmikin building and that made it important.

Femmikin.

Fantasy worlds come true. Paradise within grasp. The dream woman there, just for you, custom built—exactly. Some dug it, some didn't. It was too easy. Just think it out and write down the specs and give it to the carefully neutral advisers, have them zap your Unicredit tab and give them a few weeks to change your life.

Too easy?

George didn't think so. Too hard maybe. *What do you want in a woman, anyway?* They were so damned expensive and an ordinary algae worker or fabricator or statistician could maybe afford one if he saved and cut corners—but even then he had to hit it good on the numbers to get one before he was too old to enjoy her.

But Ellison could afford it.

Today he could afford it. Last week he couldn't. But right now he had the credit and before it dwindled away he was going to buy one. They'd have to live in his remodeled old high rise in the Tucson area but at least he wouldn't have to listen to her complaints.

But what to get? Big flashy job with all the luxury accessories? Steady dark one with built-in moxie to back him up? Something in between? George shrugged and started across the ripped-out street.

He paused halfway across to let a gray-haired man in a cream dry-foam suit get across the battered plastic plank that bridged the deep slot in the street.

They smiled ruefully at each other and George said, "Are they ever going to finish mangling the streets?"

"Never," the man answered. "It's a compulsion. Street-rippers. They get together at night and laugh over the way Navahoe Boulevard has looked for two years."

George snorted wryly and walked across the plank and on up to the impressive wood door of the big building. He paused, looking at the big carved women on each panel, then ran his tongue across his teeth and put a hand against a curved-grained buttock and pushed.

"May I help you, sir?"

Tanned. Blonde, Trim figure. Standard Femmikin blue dress. Alert blue eyes. Probably called

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Secretaire or *Efficienette* in the catalogue. Ellison was short with her, faintly embarrassed.

"Yeah. I'd like to buy a femmikin."

"Yes, sir. Do you have your specifications with you or would you like to talk to one of our advisers?"

"Uh, are your advisers, uh—"

"We have both natural and Femmikin advisers. Many people have spoken well of our Femmikin advisers, sir. They are used to dealing with many types of requests. Some most unusual."

Do I look like a guy who'd want something unusual? Maybe I do. They must get all kinds of nuts . . .

The femmikin glanced down at a electropad on her bare desk. "Our Miss Williams can see you now or, if you like, our Miss Susan."

"Which one is, uh—"

The femmikin smiled. "Miss Williams is a natural, sir. Miss Susan is one of our latest models. Both have access to our display consoles, of course, and complete credit payment plans."

"I don't need that. I'm buying it right off."

"That's very nice, sir," she smiled. "May I recommend Miss Susan, sir? She is a Femmikin, you know, and completely experienced in specification recommendations."

"Uh, okay, sure."

The femmikin pressed a button amid a plethora of multicolored buttons, smiled, and indicated a corridor. "Room seven-four-eight, please?"

"Yeah—thanks." Ellison turned and started down the corridor.

Why don't I just buy into Harry's pot farm? Or get superzonked at the Eroticon? Or move into a better cube and try to meet some citizens who aren't groggy or creepy-eyed or zapped? Or maybe find a natural and have a license full of kids?

Ellison groaned inwardly. Forget that. He'd tried that. "Naturals" was such a fabriword. But you couldn't buy femmikin children. At least not yet. Kids you had to make yourself. Provided you could find a natural you could stand to be with for more than an evening.

Must they all play games? Or are just the ones I meet the crazies? Maybe that was what was bugging someone at Fabricque d'espace when they designed the first femmikin. Or built her. Or grew her. Or all those things. A little of everything, I guess . . .

He stopped before a door. 748. Behind it was Miss Susan, he thought. Trim and blond, in a blue dress. He went in.

Her hair was dark but otherwise she was similiar to Miss Receptionist Mark IV. Why don't they make an ugly one—just for this one job? Or would that be bad

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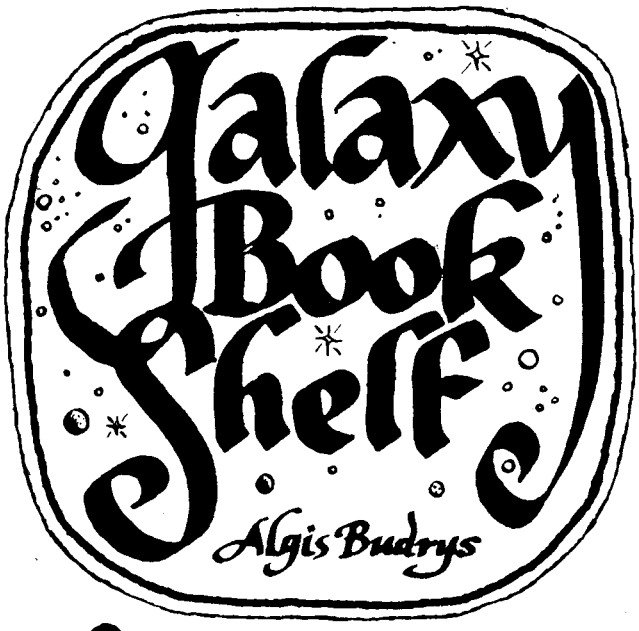

Alien Island
T. L. Sherred

The Steel Crocodile
D. G. Compton

Lord Tyger
Philip José Farmer

I'LL tell you how I feel about T. L. Sherred: when I discovered that Ballantine had published his novel (*Alien Island*, 75¢, Ballantine Book #345.01815.075), I went to the newsstand and bought it without waiting for my review copy to arrive.

To my knowledge, this is Tom Sherred's only novel. He's written little science fiction—or aught else, for all I know—and he dwells in my memory as a soft-speaking fellow who looks like the anchorman on a foundry bowling team. But that revelation of his psyche—or that imposed revelation—seems to me to strike to the heart of his importance to us all. For it was T.L.

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Sherred who sprang the first lightning crack of spurting mortar between the hitherto unbreached stones of the National Guard armory that science fiction had become. With one story, *E for Effort*, in the ASF of the wartime Forties, he handed the field such a knock that many old plinths are still loose in their sockets.

It seems a rather tame if well-told story now. Its beer-drinking characters with their non-Anglic names and their matter-of-fact awareness that the struggle is between Man and Establishment seem perfectly acceptable. One tends to forget that in the 1940s all sf people named Labiada began every sentence with *Si, Señor* while plotting to feed opium to the hero's girl. As for knowing what to do with a soldering iron, or, worse yet, with a field theory... Well, look, this was in the days when people were earning an *E* for effort, and being justifiably proud of it, but the purpose of an engineering education was to give a bright boy a leg up into the $10,000-a-year bracket before he reached pensionable age and got his gold watch from the Corporation.

And the purpose of science fiction was to elaborate on that premise. It was T.L. Sherred—utterly unknown, and previously unheard-of—who through natural wit or divine ignorance wrote a coherent, logical, entertaining, believable science-fiction story in which an entirely different view of our world was taken as a matter of course.

A number of factors conjoined to lend his deed its major importance. Not the least of these was publication in the very journal whose *geist* he deranged, at the hands of the same editor who embodied every bourgeois aspiration that Sherred dismissed as being of no consequence. It makes a fascinating paradox. A false one, probably—I don't suppose either Sherred or Campbell are anything like what I've described. But empires have gestated on less, and I'd rank *E for Effort* along with Robert Abernathy's *When the Rockets Come*—also from ASF—as one of the two major incursions of the middle 1960s into the era of the victorious wars.

Well, in any case *Alien Island* is not *E For Effort*, or even any of the three other stories (published in a bunch in the early 1950s), which constitute the known body of Sherred's science fiction to date. In fact, about all it has to recommend it as a piece of work in its own right is the Michigan locale. Not many people set romances in Detroit.

The story itself—about a barfly who becomes a galactic civilization's representative, and who dooms Earth simply by serving as a focus for human greed and vanity—is potentially noble in exactly the same way *E for Effort* was.

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And its apocalyptic ending evokes its predecessor. But it sounds better than it reads. It reads padded, uncoordinated, and unintentionally whimsical. It could easily have been a good, commonsense narrative about essentially likeable people whose lack of complication cuts like a scalpel through Man's normal fat of self-service. And I believe that's what it's intended to be, and the kind of book Sherred could write, or I wouldn't be disappointed that it isn't.

FANS of D.G. Compton will be pleased by the appearance of *The Steel Crocodile* (Ace Special #78575, 75¢). Being a Compton fan ever since *Synthajoy*, I was one of these fortunate people.

This is a good and enjoyable story about a man and his wife coming apart because they cannot come to an adequate mutual understanding of technological society as it is convincingly portrayed here in the near future.

One thing that diminishes one's pleasure in this book is the fact that this synopsis would describe *Synthajoy*, as well. And if we compare the two, *The Steel Crocodile* is invariably the paler version. In *Synthajoy*, for example, the woman in the insane asylum expresses many of her tensions in terms of her love for her lover as distinct from her husband. In *The Steel Crocodile* a lingering unresolved love for a now dead political activity is what leads Abigail eventually to desert her husband in favor of actions calculated to get her in serious trouble with the prevailing political establishment and get herself clapped into a looney bin for the rest of her life.

In fact, as far as story goes this book presents no advance over Compton's previous considerable standard. Abigail is another of Compton's extremely well-characterized women. He is I think without serious exception the very best delineator of female characters in the science-fiction field, perhaps the best we have ever had. But it may be that this gift is both intense and circumscribed, because Abigail, as noted above, is the weak sister of *Synthajoy*'s heroine.

The think-tank establishment which employs Matthew is, although a publicly chartered corporation, pretty much the private province of a hard-driving ruthless megalomaniacal director of considerable personal charm—but not as much as is displayed by *Synthajoy*'s villain.

And so on.

Matthew is one of the world's leading sociologists, and an extremely popular and well-paid consultant to private industry, which, as is already the case, is shown here to be using all the paraphernalia of social science and pseudoscience in order to increase the efficiency of its product development

(Please turn to page 155)

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OIL-MAD BUG-EYED MONSTERS

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HAYDEN HOWARD

Humans are only people—as Earth exploiters know!

THE Pacific Ocean seemed to be burning, adding to the smog. From the upper level of the piggyback freeway, as he swerved his little electric car down the offramp to her beach suburb, he glimpsed the fiery finger flickering where the offshore oil drilling platform had stood.

The immense gas flame made him think of a certain nebula and he winced because he'd been Here for eighteen years. By now he ought to be reminded of something mundane, Earthly, like the gas pilot light in an unlit stove. All the way to the horizon the ocean was darkening with wasted oil from the undersea gusher.

He swallowed. Waves of oil were lapping the beach with gleaming layers like oily—chocolate. The thought made his left stomach rumble hungrily. His right stomach contracted around the olives from the uncounted martinis he'd gulped in the metropolitan bar while he was getting her husband's signature on the oil lease.

"She'll never shine-sign," her husband had crooned drunkenly, laying his head to rest on the quaint mahogany. "She'll never shine-sign. You're not man enough to make her sign. Nobody is."

Legally the couple owned the attractive suburban home in joint tenancy, so he needed her signature, too. He was anxious to rescue the oil underneath.

But he felt unsure of his mo-

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tives. He remembered her huge eyes gleaming with an exciting anger. To his loneliness they had appeared as sensuously hard as the carapaces of twin black beetles. As beautifully hard-shelled as . . . His emotions became more confused.

His hearts beat even faster as he drove along her street.

His right stomach squirmed. The alcohol had contained quick energy but was too insubstantial for his inner organism. It lacked the essential hydrocarbons necessary for his innermost distillations. He attempted a grin but merely grimaced. Here most humor seemed distorted, unhappy anomaly, as if these people felt alien on their own planet. So what did that make him, doubly alien?

At least he was trying to save their oil. He glanced at the sky as if he could see twenty-two more years into the future and rammed a wooden barricade in the street. He parked. People were evacuating the seashore neighborhood as if they feared an oily holocaust.

He put the half-signed lease in his comfortingly hard-shelled attache case. On its plastic carapace, with his own daring brand of humor, he displayed new initials in debonair fourteen-carat gold italics: *B.E.M.*

These people seemed—stupid—wasting their most vital natural resource. He thought they deserved their future. The woman made him feel altruistic. He wanted to preserve her future.

He strode along the oil-slick sidewalk, inhaling the rich scent of oil. Delicious! Now that he had her husband's signature he thought she should at least let him inside. He winked as the sea-breeze sprayed aerosol-fine oil droplets against his baby-blue eyes. Rubbing them made his hand shiny from all the oil droplets smeared together on his skin. He sneaked a lick.

Yeah!

The estate-type tract house had an embattled look. She'd pulled the drapes together. Last Sunday, here on the asphalt driveway, her husband had told him to go to hell. But the old bluffer had been merely showing off his neighborhood integrity in front of his wife and hulking son.

Today, at high noon in the bar, that old hero had whined: "Neighbors signed. So I'm forced to get mine." His shaking hand had accepted the extra five hundred in folding money under the bar. He wouldn't report that to his wife or the I.R.S. "Now I should buy you a drink—because you won't be able to make her sign. Impossible! You been suckered."

HE KNOCKED on her door. He was afraid he would appear too boyish for her. In his conservative business suit he still resembled the snub-nosed young radio opera-

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tor from the oil tanker that had gone to the bottom eighteen years ago. Although he had negotiated hundreds of oil leases since then, he still felt hampered by that young man's startled blue eyes and wispy blond hair. Even after eighteen years he felt vulnerable without his body-shell.

He imagined her standing on the other side of the door, obstinately letting him wait. She was hard-boiled. Then he heard her steel-heeled footsteps. For a moment his hearts thudded. He pretended he was himself, safely back inside his carapace but his perverse urge toward her increased. She didn't open the door.

Finally, in his frustration, he tapped on it with his attache case. She and the Smiths were the only ones on this block who hadn't signed. The Smiths were trying to hold him up for more money than their neighbors had received—but this one was an idealist who wouldn't sell out at any price. However, she was human. She might be waiting to get more than the Smiths?

His blond eyebrows rose as he glanced into her open three-car garage. It contained an outboard motorboat and two empty stalls. He realized the garage might be a clue to her weaknesses. She didn't have a car? Her husband had driven an expensively wasteful gasoline-burner to the city. Last Sunday the garage had held a four-wheel-drive dune-buggy with a racing stripe and a high-school parking lot permit on its windshield.

He felt surprised that such a formidable woman didn't have a car of her own. Apparently both of the men in her family were able to take advantage of her. This was encouraging.

He smiled. From the corner of his eye he'd noticed a movement at the dining-room window. Between the dark drapes her fiercely beautiful face glared out at him. He nodded, trying to look suave while he opened his hard-shelled attache case. He held up the lease-option against the glass, confronting her with her husband's signature.

Her expression changed from startled to pained to puzzled to enraged. She looked down at him so haughtily, he remembered the gloriously hard face of that Italian actress gleaming through the transparent carapace of his teevee. Her eyes, glittering behind the window-glass, made him excited and disturbed. He was becoming willingly attracted to these angry ones. More and more often it was his feeling that these seductively fierce old ones were encased in invisible, chitinous exoskeletons.

In his frustration and guilty hope he had even conjectured that he was receiving emanations from their gleaming, hardened minds. He smiled wryly. He felt so lonely. Under her shiny glare through the glittering glass he imagined him-

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self light-years away. Their shells would be gleaming. In passionate recognition, their hard carapaces would begin banging together with the ferocity of their love.

One of them would crack, he thought. Even his human heart was pounding. He heard her hard heels crossing the floor. She was coming to the front door. He turned again to face it.

The door opened but not enough. He saw a gleaming security chain. Above it in the darkness of the hall hung her glittering eyes. She glared as if he were to blame for the underwater oil gusher and everything else wrong with her world. He felt innocent. Inhuman. For a joyous instant he felt as if he had regrown his carapace. He was handsomely shiny, virilely armored. But even in his excitement he remembered not to stridulate. He lowered his attache case.

He said, "Hi," as if he had forgotten the unpleasantness on Sunday.

Her voice had a hard, rasping edge.

"I was afraid you'd talk him into—"

"Bought him a Tom Collins," he interrupted brightly, trying to deflect even more of her anger onto her husband. "Slipped him an extra hundred for signing but I'm —wasn't supposed to—tell." He imitated a laugh. Their native games of false truthfulness seemed to him as absurdly useful as their humor. "But he's got it."

"Get off our porch."

The harshness of her voice reminded him of the stridulations preceding love and he glanced at the sky.

IN HIS frustration and loneliness he felt even worse than shellless. He had wanted to remain faithful. He had only twenty-two more years to wait. But he needed to bang against something. He glanced shyly at this weird creature who was repeatedly emitting repetitious stridulations.

"I won't sign. Not even if we're the last family on this block."

"You are," he said. "Did your husband telephone you like he told me he would?"

"All of you—you're ruining everything."

It was like a love song. He fought to keep his head.

"I don't have anything to do with that mess." He glanced toward the ocean. "Believe me, I'm trying to help you save your property values. This oily fog is soaking into my suit. If you'd let me inside—"

"Get out!"

He blinked. He wasn't even in, yet she was telling him to get out. He decided to force entry via his guilt-by-accusation approach. Because they lacked shells, many of these creatures were so vulnerable they acted as if the sins of others were their own. He had noticed

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they usually surrendered to any authoritarian or priestly voice.

"You're to blame," he said wildly. "You're all to blame. You didn't try hard enough a year ago when you could have prevented off-shore drilling. Now look what's happened because of self-centered people like you." He added loudly as if broadcasting to her neighbors: "Is it because your husband works for—"

"Shut up. He's not much more than a bookkeeper," she hissed, peeking out of the doorway but not unhitching the chain. "He wasn't involved in any way."

"Ah, but his clients—" he retorted, having no idea whose accounts her husband serviced. "You know as well as I do that their incomes are dependent on transportation and other vital parts of the economy which need oil. It's your lifeblood and mine. Ours?"

He stepped toward her but she started to close the door in his face.

"At least you're not afraid," he bleated, hurriedly redirecting his approach. "You're not afraid of anything, are you?" he murmured humbly as if she'd defeated him, as if he were no threat to fair womanhood because he was so endearingly boyish and weak. "Could I come inside and rest for a moment?"

"Get off my porch!"

He shrugged. He straightened sternly. Like a process-server, supported by the commanding power of a government, he flashed his lease option.

"Better read the fine print."

"I won't sign it."

"Read it." In his business he'd discovered the best way to convince women was to confuse them.

She reached for it. He yanked it away.

"Everybody in your block will be getting his or her rightful share. Are you too proud to accept yours?"

"Mine?" she shrilled. "You've ruined our town."

"Not our company." He hoped a few argumentative maneuvers would lead him into her house. She might let him in while trying to get the last word. He thrust: "You're trying to blame us for wanting to help you."

She retorted, "You're trying to force us to permit drilling in our town."

"We're trying to preserve your natural resources," he exclaimed. "I don't work for an incompetent drilling company. Here, look at our brochure."

His present truthfulness was preordained by the ultimate lie.

"I don't care who you work for."

She pressed outward against the door so the security chain strained and he began to think of it as the chastity belt to her house.

"Listen," he said, "what I care about is conservation and decency and freedom. I'm trying to help

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you save something from your property value before it drops below what you owe on your mortgage and you end with nothing while the people across the street become millionaires." He pointed a finger across the street. "They've all signed up except for one old lady who's in Europe and they're trying to contact her today. If they package that block as a drilling site, we won't need yours. And we won't need your neighbors' lots we've optioned." He pointed his finger at her. "Because you waited too long we won't be able to take up any of our options in this block. Your neighbors' last chance for wealth and happiness will be gone because of you. They'll blame you."

Her eyes glinted from the darkness. She did not unhitch the security chain. He felt baffled.

HE WAS unable to judge the effect of his greed-fright technique but he added ominously: "Your block won't even be a truck parking site if you don't sign. The leasers will tap your oil pool from across the street and toss you a few dollars. They'll paint their derricks green and plant a couple of trees. They'll park their big trucks where those houses used to be. Those people will have moved away—rich. Their oil pumps will be so loud that you won't be able to sleep. No one will buy your house at any price—except me—now."

"We bought our house with rights and covenants. Zoning—"

"It's cracked wide open," he interrupted. "Your own Town Council is selling the dump for a drilling site after the Planning Board designated it as a future park and our latest survey after the—" he jerked his head toward the ocean—" shows the people know they're licked. Because of the continuous mess off shore, seventy-six percent of the voters now are in favor of controlled drilling within the town limits. Then the town will begin collecting some oil taxes. Unfortunately, the state and Federal Governments have been getting all the bonuses and royalties from the off-shore leases. You've been getting nothing," he finished triumphantly, "except more and more oil on your beach."

"We marched in protest," she blurted.

"And gave up because you know you can't win," he said holding out the lease. "You and your neighbors will be getting fair recompense if you sign this."

She glanced from the maze of small print to his face and handed the paper back to him. At least she hadn't torn it up. He let his voice smile.

"Now if we could go inside so you can study this—"

"No." But oddly she laughed. "I could call the police."

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"Their telephone number is nine-nine-nine," he said and she shrugged.

Although she did not unchain the door, neither did she close it. He started his penultimate maneuver.

"Your husband said you wouldn't be able to understand any of this anyway." He turned away but did not put the lease back into his attache case. He heard a metallic sound and knew it was the door chain. In his excitement he imagined there were hard shells between himself and the woman and that they would bang together as he entered.

Her eyes glistened, retreating. He took a deep breath as she let him into the dark hallway. He guessed a bedroom was at the end. With his human heart thudding, he followed her into the living room, laughing, feeling out of breath.

Sometimes he wondered if the radio operator's body were gradually capturing him. If so, the female ones should seem beautiful to him. He looked at her grim face. It was her shield, he thought, but such an inadequate shell. Her resentment and weaknesses seemed nakedly exposed. He toyed with them, watching her features, savoring the hardness he detected.

"Your husband told me not to tell," he laughed, "which topless bar I left him in."

Her expression became even more rigid. He established himself on the couch, spreading the pages of the lease option on the coffee table.

"You're wasting your time," she grated, not sitting down. "I won't sign. What did my husband—"

"IT was a dating bar," he said imaginatively, reaching up and switching on a standing lamp to illuminate the splendors of the lease. Its parchment and engraving were the best. "We agree to pay you a thousand a month until we drill. You can't lose a thing because you keep living here until we pay you twice its appraised value as a residence. When this block goes into production you'll begin receiving your share of royalties and tax advantages just like the other millionaires."

"What was the name of the bar? He was calling me from his office."

"You thought." He laughed. "The important thing is—we pay you in stock and stock options. You'll be in the oil business too. You help yourself tax-wise by your share of future exploration expense write-offs. You'll even have your own depletion allowance. That's how millionaires are made. Why don't you phone your husband's office. You'll find out he's not there."

"Get out." She glared down at him. "I won't believe anything you

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say. You're the oil company my husband told me appeared out of nowhere. Fly-by-night."

"Right." He acted as if this were praise—and it was. "Actually we've been growing for eighteen years. Your husband understands the growth advantages of the oil biz. He knows we've been building a beautiful corporate structure. We find oil, pump oil, store oil—we may never need to sell any." He laughed and what he said was almost true. "As our worth increases, we're able to issue more stock. Next time you're on the freeway, look down at View Point. It overlooks our tank farm." His human face smiled seductively at her. "Domestically produced oil has become better than money in the bank since the controls on foreign oil imports. In the interests of national security and to stimulate domestic oil exploration, oil and gasoline prices are rising. By simply storing our oil and never selling any our company is doing more than its part to improve the price of domestically produced crude. Do you follow me? Our oil in storage is constantly increasing in value, so that we're able to issue growing amounts of stock to finance ever expanding operations—we drill and pump more oil and build more storage tanks and our growth stocks are like money in the bank—only better. You see? You understand as much about the oil business as your husband does. Sit down and read the fine print."

"I don't care what you're promising me. There's oil all over our beach."

"Not our oil," he insisted. "We're very careful about waste."

But she was listening to her feelings rather that to his voice.

She murmured, "We moved to this town because it's nearer the beach. Now it's ruined."

"True," he agreed somberly. "The truth is, this town is ruined as a good place to live. And I'm trying to help you save yourself."

"Like rats leaving the sinking ship?"

"We're helping conservation," he replied. "When we buy your house you'll receive enough to move to another beautiful town where there are no underlying oil strata. The value of your stock certificates will keep going up—and you must appreciate that we're rescuing oil for future generations."

"That doesn't make sense. Get out."

"By increasing the domestic cost of oil," he pleaded, becoming a supplicant, "we're truly encouraging the development of better sources of power, atomically powered electric generator plants, battery-electric cars. I don't sound like other oil company men because my thinking—our thinking is far ahead of theirs."

"Then go out and drill for for-

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eign oil. Allow us to burn theirs, not ours. Get out of our town."

"And let our nation's oil needs become dependent on foreign whims? Our national security—"

"Get out or I'll phone my husband to throw you out."

HE MANAGED to keep a straight human face, though, he could not believe she was serious. His voice became soothing.

"Phone him? If you find him he'll say to sign the lease. He's a man, so he understands that by pumping oil into tanks we're conserving it. He knows irreplaceable oil mustn't be destroyed by fire and end as smog. He knows it should produce more important things, such as petrochemicals and plastics and pharmaceuticals and food. Your husband drank—"

He didn't know why she was laughing but her gleaming teeth made him imagine a seductive carapace of glossy chitin and he listened raptly to the harshness of her voice.

"I know what you want." she pointed at the lease. "Get out." Her voice sagged. "Don't just sit there."

He spread five one-hundred-dollar bills on the excitingly hard coffee table. "No need to tell your husband," he laughed. "Start your own Swiss bank account. Buy yourself a little green—"

"Get out. What do you think I am?"

She was looking at him instead of the money and he felt more confused.

He began to wonder whether her expression was haughtiness or stupidity. Money might be too abstract. She needed something more tangible, he thought.

"Why don't you choose a car," he began. "For yourself." He laughed, watching her expression. "Your husband and your son race around in theirs, leaving you trapped at home. Listen—you'll look beautiful in a little sports car with your hair streaming in the wind. I'll—we'll buy you a cute car, your bonus for signing. It'll be yours, all yours."

Watching her grim expression, he began describing an electric sports car like his own. There was such fondness in his voice he might have been describing a baby and she—smiled.

"I had an accident," she murmured, "a few years ago but—" She sat down on the other end of the couch while he described its wire wheels.

"Electrics are so easy to drive," he said.

"You mean you're only offering me an electric car?" she complained. "Like thanks—but I don't feel I'm an old lady yet."

"You're quoting oil company propaganda." He laughed. "Not my oil company. We're financing research for better electrics—our subsidiary builds them. Ninety

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miles an hour fast enough for you?"

She squinted. "I thought they weren't allowed on thruways."

"They are this year—we've been buying politicians too." He sobered. "I'll show you my runabout. It's yellow with a vinyl top. You'll have your choice of interchangeable fiberglass bodies." He spread out a sales brochure. "Cute, huh? Picture your hair streaming back." He couldn't really. As she looked down at the pictures of electric cars he imagined her encased in fiberglass. Then she was invisible in an excitingly shiny chitinous carapace, drumming and clacking with passion.

He moved toward her shimmering carapace.

"Think of yourself encapsulated," he murmured, "in your cute little car. You'll be giving of yourself patriotically by conserving irreplaceable oil and gliding electrically and soundlessly and smoglessly—" he paused for a long, quivering breath—"while future generations revere you." He had learned whatever he said to women during his sales pitch was less important than his tone of voice. "Your oil is too wonderful to be burned while millions are starving. Sign here if you believe in conservation. The anciently formed molecules of oil must not be burned, because millions of years are needed for oil to be born again. Oil doesn't regenerate during one man's lifetime like a pine forest. It can't renew itself every year like a field of wheat. Yet it can provide protein for the starving—that is, there are bacteria that feed on oil—an intermediate step." He sighed, moving nearer to her. "Anaerobic bacteria, needing no air, are able to do this deep in the Earth—they sometimes clog oil wells. Here's my pen."

HE MOVED closer, making soothing noises. "You'll be saving oil for starving babies. On the surface, airy—aerobic—bacteria can be fed oil if air and moisture are bubbled through with infinitely small quantities of salts essential to growth. How fast they grow! You'll be glad to know that every pound of aerobic bacteria multiplies so fast that every day it produces ten more pounds of nutritious protein. The lives of millions of malnourished children can be strengthened if you'll sign on this line."

He grimaced, inwardly hating children and feeling that anaerobic and aerobic bacteria were equally disgusting little competitors, less efficient than he was—but at least their oil wasn't wasted as smoky exhaust fumes. These people were insane!

He watched her unpleasantly flexible fingers moving the pen. Above her lengthening signature gleamed the pen's plastic hardness, arousing him so that he imagined

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again a shiny round carapace, so chitinously beautiful that he wanted to bang—

"Hey, what's the matter with you?" Her voice rasped, although he had barely touched her distressing softness. She lurched up from the couch. She laughed uneasily. "Am I supposed to be flattered or feel grateful at my age? You're—don't get any ideas just because you've promised to buy me a car."

Her eyes gleamed so confusingly as he rose that he saw her encased in transparent chitin. She sidled away, trying to watch him while she lit a cigarette with trembling hands. Although he flinched from the flash of flame, her silvery lighter made him think of a beautifully metallized carapace and he advanced. The proper approach would have been a couple of quick symbolic taps of his carapace against hers. Then they could begin banging until one of them cracked. But she dodged and he kept glimpsing her distractingly human face. She seemed ready to scream. He realized he'd better start with a ritual more familiar to her. Whichever way he twisted his head, as she backed away, his lips were confronted by the dangerously hot tip of her cigarette.

As he bumped her against the wall, she gasped and shoved back. This seemed encouraging. But she elbowed his unshielded right stomach and he felt a hydrogen gas bubble rising from his earlier con-

BERKLEY SF

tac-tac-tac!

Spandau bullets raved past G-8's Spad as its mighty Hisso whined the plane into a turn, bringing his guns to bear on the hapless Fokker. . . .

Well, space opera it wasn't, but G-8 AND HIS BATTLE ACES—coming this month from Berkley—hit a lot of the same nerve-ends as did the livelier pulp SF of those bygone years. . . . And anyhow, what about Herr Doktor Kreuger and those giant bats . . . or the good Doktor's notion of transplanting cobra eyes into pilots' heads, they should see in the dark? There's science for you!

Berkley April releases

G-8 AND HIS BATTLE ACES #1, THE BAT STAFFEL, Robert J. Hogan (X1734, 60¢)

THE TWILIGHT MAN, Michael Moorcock (S1820, 75¢)

RETIEF: AMBASSADOR TO SPACE, Keith Laumer (S1829, 75¢)

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version of martinis. Like a balloon it pressed against his throat's biway valve. For an instant he feared ignition from her cigarette. As he turned his head away to eructate discreetly she ducked under his arm and escaped through the dining room.

Muttering apologies, he pursued her into the kitchen. She jerked open a drawer. He glimpsed her hand gripping something attractively metallic. His amorous excitement converted it to a shiny, protective carapace and he continued his advance.

"Keep away," her human voice gasped.

But she glittered.

In his passionate confusion he was unable to decide whether he was seeing a steely-bright carapace where she had been or a stainless-steel carving knife in her human hand. He clacked inquiringly.

His legs weakened as he advanced. It was if some conscious remnant of the young radio operator were aware of the knife—he hardened his human stomach muscles. She gleamed so gorgeously that he began to stridulate with fierce joy. He felt invulnerable to the thrust of steel within his handsomely gleaming shell, even though his body was quivering. If he turned out not to be knife-proof the autopsy would expose everything. He reached for her.

Across space, separated by light-years from the carapaces of their oil-hungry wives, he and his kind had come. Their little twelve-carapacer had scouted an oil slick. In their excitement they had rammed the tanker, splattering delicious oil.

Belatedly they had recovered comatose bodies of its crew. Because he was the youngest Shieldwiper he had been relegated to the smallest body—that of the snub-nosed young radio operator.

THAT had been eighteen years ago. He lunged at her. As she dodged she seemed to fluctuate between a breast-heaving woman with a knife and a beautifully gleaming carapace clacking so passionately that she resembled his wife.

It would be twenty-two more years before the breeding fleet could arrive in this solar system. He clacked imploringly as he groped for her.They had removed his carapace surgically. Concealed in seamen's bellies he and the other eleven had managed to infiltrate this outrageous world. They had seen its shell-less bipeds squandering irreplaceable oil. Oil had to be saved for posterity—his.

He grabbed at her as if he were a man.

Pooling the first meager earnings of their new identities, all twelve had bought oil stocks. They had operated shrewdly. When they

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DUNCAN
LUNAN

THE MOON OF THIN REALITY

Interface relays had opened the Universe to Man—and his betters!

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MCKAY was on his way back from the U.N. when the emergency broke. The Sasarenn RLV, his badge of office as Earth planetary agent, was cruising on ramjets high in the stratosphere, peaceful in the afternoon sunlight. He could have set up an Interface, now that the orbital relays were in position, and flown through a hole in the sky straight from the coast to the spacefield in Montana for further details but Air Traffic Control had flatly refused to wear it. Nevertheless, some agreement on the use of Interface would shortly be needed: now that Earth was firmly connected into the interstellar communications net, McKay suspected that the sky would fill with starships seeking profit of one kind or another. Any or all of the member races of the Interface could now descend on Earth to seek—hopefully, in some instances, to confer—whatever advantages there might be in this new link-up. Furtherance teams, the survey force of the Interface, were working through the solar system right now, planting relay satellites at places of interest. To keep any kind of control over the development of the system's resources Earth would need quick-thinking and decisive action—whereas a directive "to conform to local ordinances Interface is not to be used within the planetary atmosphere—" would be a good start to making Earth a primitive reservation.

But, the emergency:

Alerted by the receiver implanted in the back of his skull, McKay said, "Acknowledge—" to the ship's computer/autopilot and got back through the ship's perception circuits a display readout from the stricken Furtherance vessel. Moments later Devlin, in the copilot's seat, got a more conventional warning from the field in Montana.

"Walt's in trouble," Devlin told McKay. "Seems he just stopped with a bang in mid-transmission."

"Just when they started retrofire, something lit nearby and homed in," said McKay. The Sasarenn, in a few weeks' skirmishing with the Furtherance, had left Earth other souvenirs besides the RLV. "I'm setting up for immediate rendezvous."

Walter Slazeck, their Apollo teammate in the era three months dead, had left Montana hours before as observer on a Furtherance ship mapping the Earth/Moon system. Walt and the alien crew had gone to the moon the hard way, charting magnetic-field/solar-wind interaction, and as they neared their destination some Sasarenn leftover had wakened and hit them. The RLV—Recovery and Liason Vehicle—was built for aerospace rescue and Traffic Control could shelve the procedural problem.

"I am about to leave your control area," McKay warned them courteously.

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The computers had the orbital parameters of the falling Furtherance ship, which couldn't possibly have been worse. They had acquisition of the Earth relay, exit code for the lunar relay and the instruction to match orbits.

"Up Interface."

A circle of blue terrestrial sky before the cruising jet shimmered and became black, airless space, spread with the faint suspicion of stars. Even before they reached it the lunar horizon rolled into view, it and the blackness beyond replacing more and more of the sky ahead.

The RLV went smoothly through the disc and the streaming contrails stopped dead in a last puff of ice crystals. The air intakes closed automatically as the blue window behind the ship receded and snapped shut.

And there McKay and Devlin were, suddenly moved a quarter of a million miles, plunging headlong on to the surface of the moon at about twenty-five miles a second. All the RLV's fuel wouldn't make enough retrofire to save the Furtherance ship—which itself would make no maneuvers to judge from the mess it was in.

McKay didn't even glance directly at the lunar surface rushing into greater and greater detail beyond the broken wreck. If he had he would have been hypnotized like a rabbit. He still had a mile to close up with Slazeck, thanks to the statistical uncertainty of that rushed computation. The RLV computer was already set for rendezvous.

He fired the rocket motor, said, "Implement—" and the ships came closer in a surge of acceleration.

"Slazeck to McKay." Detachment in a crisis was that man's outstanding characteristic. "By our clock we hit in forty seconds. You can't possibly make docking and transfer. Turn over and slow up."

"Haven't enough fuel for that, Walt," said McKay over the sound of the rocket.

Full secondary boost was eating the distance between the two ships while adding to the RLV's appalling velocity toward the moon. In five seconds they would overhaul Slazeck—in eight they would strike. The computer/autopilot, without pulling its favorite trick of grabbing control away from McKay, had put all systems on full emergency and could take over at any moment. The radio was a-babble with voices from Earth and from other ships telling him this was a wasteful sacrifice and that he must leave the cripple to its fate. Couldn't anybody see what he was going to try?

"Up Interface—"

AS THE Furtherance ship came alongside, the familiar circle broke open ahead, embedded as it

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seemed right in the face of the moon, though it must still be miles above the surface. Its resemblance to a bottomless crater was destroyed by its low velocity relative to the ships—as the disc of unbroken blackness floated gently toward them, lunar features whipped ever faster out from behind it. What would happen if the disc touched the surface McKay had no idea—had there been time, he would have selected an Interface at rest with respect to the Moon. As it was, he hadn't even picked an exit code and had no idea what the disc faced into.

The disc itself gave no clue as it loomed up. Nothing at all was to be seen in it.

Not even stars.

"Where the hell are we going?" shouted Devlin.

The moon's face became two-dimensional, a boulder-strewn disc, with them going down the hole in the middle into unrelieved blackness. McKay thought wildly of the medieval character who broke through the shell of the Universe into the unfathomable workings beyond. Out of the known fell the two ships—sun and Earth behind them were blotted out, then the stars themselves as the Interface closed.

"Good grief, Mac," said Devlin, recovering. "Where?"

Nothing was visible, not even Slazeck's ship—there was no light source. On the radar the Furtherance ship was slowly receding; it was all there was on the radar. Without that blip to relate to McKay might really have believed himself out of the physical universe altogether.

"Walt," he said urgently.

"Still here, Mac. But I can't see where—all visual sensors have gone dead."

Now there was a thought.

"We have no visual input either, Walt. Watch for our jet as we correct for rendezvous."

Normally the RLV's "eyes" cut out the blue glare of the fusion motor but this time he made sure of getting it. Reassuringly it was there as they headed for Slazeck. The Furtherance ship was too far to reflect it but Slazeck reported he could see the burn. So the properties of space were normal here—it just happened to be empty. To the limits of visibility? Impossible. McKay deployed the RLV's full bank of search devices and gave the problem to the computer, which could run through the channels much faster than the human brain.

"We've got something," he announced moments later. "A speck in the infra-red—barely visible to the eye. I'm going to higher magnification. What do you make of that, Dev?"

"Out of radar range—it can only be a star, Mac."

"You're right, Dev," said McKay after a pause, studying the

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enlarged image. (The RLV's computerized perception circuits gave complete head-up display from any of the sensors). "With that diameter and luminosity it can only be a red dwarf, so we must be well within its gravity field, after all."

"We have a radar echo on the other side, Mac."

It was on the other side, exactly —radially opposite to the minute spark of a sun—so faint and diffuse an echo that only the computer could have edited it from the background. Background was surprisingly high, in fact.

"That has to be what brought us here."

"Interface brought us here, surely." Slazeck was listening but still wasn't fully informed.

"I'm afraid not, Walt. We came through blind. I've no idea where we are and whatever delivered us here, it wasn't an Interface satellite. According to our scanners there's no such thing within millions of miles."

"All our Interface equipment went out in the missile hit, so I can't check. Are you sure yours is functioning?"

"All systems go, Walt."

"Then I suggest we match orbit and get out of here," Devlin put in. "Whatever that is, we're receding from it at nearly thirty miles a second and if it's like an Interface relay, we'll be out of range in minutes."

"Right," said McKay. "All the recorders are running. We can puzzle out what this place may be once we're safely out of it." He corrected again, bringing the RLV in towards the mangled Furtherance ship. The RLV lights flicked on, found broken metal all up the hull. "Don't worry, Walt, we'll have you out of there minutes after we get back."

"Sure, Mac, just as soon as you can." McKay wasn't fooled, he knew that detachment of old.

"Are you hurt, Walt?"

"Ah, there's something in my leg. I'm sealed into my acceleration capsule and the medic tape's taken care of it. Can't raise the Furtherance boys on the intercom, though."

"Okay, Walt, here we go." The RLV was in position, exit code for the Earth satellite selected. "General access, up Interface."

Nothing.

"Try again," said McKay, aiming a tight-beam signal at the elusive radar echo. "Up Interface— Not even an acquisition pulse."

LASER communication was no more effective. Wherever they might be, there was no easy escape. Leaving the puzzle aside, McKay and Devlin went to work on the rescue. Here they were on familiar ground—the RLV systems were designed for this. Even the absence of external light was no handicap—the Sasarenn had allowed for rescue in planetary

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shadow. With work lights deployed, both men opened an emergency hatch into the Furtherance ship.

The missile had done massive damage. Of the crew only four, counting Slazeck, were still alive. The cabin was so badly damaged that the sealed acceleration capsules had to be cut free before they could be maneuvered out of the hatch. Here the RLV systems were no substitute for hard labor, made worse by the lighting difficulties. One of the Furtherance team showed signs of regaining consciousness by the time the capsules were brought in through the RLV's recovery hatch. The RLV could carry six but the closed shields left very little room in the cabin. The injuries might be light enough for them to be opened in due course but even so, movement would be difficult from here on.

Three hours later the medic tapes had done enough to allow two of the shields to be opened. Slazeck and the alien stayed in their couches to allow McKay into the main cabin for a conference. Devlin stayed at the controls, with the hatch open. The other aliens were seriously injured and would not wake till several programs were completed.

"There's still nothing in detector range except the dwarf and that faint blip astern," McKay summarized. "We are traveling rapidly toward the sun, which is evidently of point nine solar mass and in the final stages of contraction and cooling. It has a very slow rotation, so we might expect a planetary system—but we can't find anything except the mystery echo, which is in circular orbit a hundred million miles out. And whatever it is, it's far too small to be called a planet. It's not visible at any magnification we have."

"That can't be right, Mac," said Devlin from up front.

"Yes? Go on."

"Well, if that blip were in orbit we'd no longer be directly between it and the sun. We're on a hyperbolic path and moving pretty fast—but it's still radially opposite the sun."

"Meaning it's not following a circular orbit but a projection of our path on a sphere?"

The cabin speaker came on.

"Perhaps—" it said tonelessly.

It was, of course, a computer translation of what the alien had said into his mike. The Furtherance officer was about four feet six, built for high gravity—the big flat head, sunk into the shoulders, was covered with heavy folds of gray skin, between two of which shone brilliant eyes. Slazeck had introduced him as Kiliath.

"Please go on," McKay said. Off their own ships, the Furtherance astronauts were often painfully self-conscious.

"I had thought, hitherto, that we saw no stars because we were

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deep in some dark nebula. But perhaps we are in a stranger place. Why should space itself reflect our radar, unless there be no further space?"

The alien's own voice, a mere whisper, was drowned out by the computer translation. But the machine translated only words, not logic—obviously several jumps had been missed.

"No further space? You mean, we're in another cosmos, one with only one star to hold it open?"

"We are nowhere in the Interface net. Perhaps we have come to a place the Furtherance could never reach."

THE logic of that one was easier. The Furtherance had the honorable task of widening the Interface by carrying the first relays across interstellar space to new stars. A place the Furtherance could never reach would be out of contact with the known universe altogether.

"Before we get too scared," said McKay, "Our counters are still picking up high-energy cosmic rays. That seems to me to indicate that space goes on outside the shell—figuratively speaking—and there are other stars out there."

"Figuratively?" Slazeck queried. "If there were a physical shell around us our radar sweep would only reflect back to us from one pont—the one radially nearest to us. And wasn't there some astronomer who suggested—yeah, that's it!" Slazeck's voice took on an unaccustomed edge. "Break up the planets around a dying star and build a shell to conserve its radiation output, the man said. A deal like that would explain this whole bit. So if we send out directional radar pulses—it won't be perfectly smooth—we should get some sort of echo back wherever we point the dish. Get to it, Dev. Even one echo will confirm it. We don't need to wait hours for pulses—minutes, I suppose, not hours—but some infra-red scanning should settle the point. You were talking before about background noise being high."

"Okay, modify that search program," McKay said.

Within minutes they had adequate confirmation. So far from being isolated beyond sight of other stars, they were falling toward the center of a finite sphere not much larger than the orbit of the Earth, though the sun was only a red spark and looked fantastically remote.

"Now it's plain how we came here," said Kiliath. "To reorganize the very planets—something here must have capability to manipulate matter."

Reconstruct that one. McKay tried. The building of the shell must have involved matter-transmission much more advanced than the Interface. The planets must have been systematically broken down, fed through transmitters on

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their own surfaces into the shell—how could it have been assembled in parts? It must have been suspended in space, component atom by component atom, and materialized as a unit. It still must be under some such control or surely it would break up. For the shell was stationary—orbital forces would not keep it from folding sunward. McKay doubted if any forces could have held so huge a structure together, spinning. So something kept the sun in the center even now. Some free-fall arrangement—constantly monitored, perhaps? And some configuration of forces, perhaps a side-lobe of what held the shell in place, had isopotential with that freak Interface which must, after all, have hit the surface of the moon.

"Fantastic," said McKay, studying the geometrical patterns, more intricate with every increase of magnification, revealed all over the "heavens" by the scanners. "So we're surrounded not just by matter but by a 'capability to manipulate matter—' suggesting life and intelligence? In vast numbers—or quantity—if all the inner face reflects sentience. We must contact it—if it can reconstruct how we got here no doubt it can send us back."

"Immediate action is recommended," the Kiliath "voice" put in. "Already we are a half-million miles from the shell and accelerating all the time."

"That's no problem. This ship's communication equipment can bridge the shell if need be."

"The limitations of the propulsion system give greater cause for concern."

"We don't need propulsion, do we?" Devlin asked, puzzled. "I don't think we need worry about a scorching from that sun and we don't go near anything else—"

"Not the point," said McKay grimly. "We come back to the shell itself at the velocity with which we left it—thirty miles a second. With full tanks, if we expend all the fuel we have, we can cut that down by maybe twelve mps—"

"We might just get a circular orbit out of that," said Slazeck.

But a check with the computer showed they could not, from their present position, make any orbit that did not intersect the shell. They could come down to circular orbital speed within the confines of the shell but the ship would then be on a very long ellipse—the major component of their velocity would still be directed outward.

"A circular orbit wouldn't be much good to us anyway," McKay concluded. "We'd be buzzing like a fly around the inner face of the shell at eighteen miles a second and the inhabitants—or whatever shaped this space—might just think it funny to leave us there. If ever we attracted their attention in the first place."

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"Surely they know we're here already," protested Devlin.

"I've seen no evidence of it," said McKay. "Take another scan of the shell, Dev." He plugged in himself to make his point more clearly. "Did we know anything was there until half an hour ago? Even now the smallest shell section we can scan is more than a mile across. You wouldn't detect much human activity on that scale—unless you watched through the seasons."

"I'm talking about their ability to detect a ship—if anyone's out there. A ship isn't easily missed even if it came through on the Interface. And wouldn't the Interface cast a shadow?"

"Too far out to cast a shadow . . . but, a half-mile across . . . should have been visible against the sun even to the naked eye if anyone happened to be looking."

"You're forgetting the apparent diameter of the sun," said Slazeck, who was doing the same calculation in his head. "It's only a point source here."

"Right, by God! So the Interface would have blotted out the sun over a measurable area. So on the shell they could calculate where it was in space—if they knew the diameter of the disc."

"They'd get that by triangulation from the edge of the shadow."

"Right. Now, could they figure out what it was? If they got a telescope in time they'd see stars—"

"Not from this side. They'd see lunar craters if anything. If they flashed an alert across—*what's blocking off our sun?*—people on the other side would see stars in it."

"Total duration of the Interface was less than thirty seconds," said Kiliath. "Very fast reaction—on both sides of the shell—to effect such observation. Communication impossible."

"True. But then—they'd see the fusion burn."

"They'd see that from two thousand miles, all right, against a black background."

"Ergo, they know we're here."

"If so," said Slazeck, "they are not doing very much about it."

"True," said McKay, after a slight pause. "Get the computer to start pushing out a contact program, Dev. Of course, we're still only speculating that anything sentient is there. The assumption may be arrogant. Keep it in mind."

"Right, Mac. Where do you want the contact aimed?"

"Ah," Slazeck said.

"Now, there's a question," McKay said. "Aim it at the point nearest us when we emerged. If they're still trying to figure out the Interface back there we might be able to explain it to them."

AFTER twelve hours, however, McKay began broadcasting to a larger segment of the shell. The

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first attempt hadn't conclusively failed but possibly there were no suitable receivers in the area originally covered—and the longer they waited, the weaker signals to a larger area would become. They widened the beam until a quarter of the shell was covered by it—surely something in that large an area would pick it up if sentience were there. But two full days later, with ever more of the shell's geometry lost in the distance, there was still no acknowledgment.

"I don't know what to do next," said McKay. They had discussed moving the communications laser out from the center of the radio receiving area but had no more obvious target for it. "They may not yet have cracked the code—though I would expect a sentience advanced enough to create the shell to get it in a couple of repeats at most. But it should be obvious to them that we're trying to communicate, so why don't they at least acknowledge?"

"They themselves," said Kiliath, "no longer communicate by by such channels. We detect no traffic in radio or in light across the shell, Either they communicate around the shell or by means we cannot detect."

"Scare us some more," said Devlin. "How far ahead of us are they likely to be?"

"That sun was once like your own. Being less massive, it will have left the main sequence sooner—intelligence may have appeared here early or late or even come from elsewhere. But they were able to survive the sun's departure from the main sequence and to build the shell once cooling began. This may have been a titanic effort, stretching the race to its fullest capacity, or it may have been a momentary distraction, ensuring future comfort while applying the mind to greater things. Probably the latter—for surely they could have crossed space to new worlds had they wished."

"We don't know what's outside the shell, of course," said Slazeck. "This star might really be isolated. Or maybe they built the shell—not to keep solar energy in but to keep something worse out. We could have a galactic nucleus exploding around us out there."

"Perhaps," said Kiliath. "But it might be more aptly phrased, 'We had a galactic nucleus exploding out there.' We may suppose from the reduced output of the star that the shell is many millions of years old."

"So you think," said Devlin slowly, "that having built the shell casually to supply their wants, between night and morning, they have then been advancing millions of years from that stage?"

"You compared us before to a fly trapped in here, Mac," said Slazeck. "Insects communicate by sound and scent and sight—but we don't heed any of it."

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"I've never believed in that kind of superintelligence," said McKay. "I'm inclined to think their apparent lack of interest when a couple of spaceships materialize in here on the bounce is evidence that they've regressed over that time."

"*Communicate around the shell*," mused Slazeck. "Could they have regressed so far that their outlook has become wholly two-dimensional?"

"I should think that would depend on their physical structure initially," said McKay. "They might come to think of themselves, I suppose, as dwelling in a finite two-dimensional universe warped back on itself through a third spatial dimension, as abstract to them as the fourth dimension is to us. Sunlight falls vertically on every part of the sphere. The level of incident solar energy is the same everywhere. There's nothing to bring the sun to their attention as being outside the surface, so to speak."

"We'll never communicate from off the surface, that's for sure," said Devlin. "Not after we 'communicate' with it at thirty miles a second."

"ON THE other hand," said the Kiliath translation. "Unlikely that their computers, at whom our contact program is initially aimed, will have lost the depth concept. Even if the inhabitants think of them as arbitrarily determining the shell in relation to abstract flow of energy, the machines must have sensors of some kind relating to the physical sun. Some kind of investigation should follow their receipt of coherent patterns of energy from our laser. Mere possession of our code should lead to contact."

"But—no contact."

"No contact indeed, either by living intelligence or by their thinking constructs. At the level of advance postulated, we may find it difficult to make the identification."

"First we have to make the contact," McKay insisted. "If they no longer use our means and we—obviously, by now—don't respond to theirs, their next logical move would be to intercept us."

"If they still have any physical spacecraft," said Slazeck. "If they do, they're probably powered for scarcely more than fine guidance—all they'd have to do would be drop off the shell and swing around the sun to the destination point. They'd come back to the shell at exactly the speed with which they left it."

"And we haven't seen any such free-fall boats to date. If we did pass near one we'd still be thirty mps faster—and nothing launched from the shell since we came through could catch us even without that."

"Precisely. So to intercept us,

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they'd want to match course and speed by something analagous to Interface. And since we knew that they're a long way ahead of us in matter transmission, and probably use m-t fields to maintain the shell structure, I dare say they move things from point to point in the same fields and never come into inner space here at all. So now, if they want to intercept us, chances are they won't have any physical craft for the purpose."

"Shouldn't take them long to knock something up if they have to have spacecraft at all," said McKay.

"But," Kiliath asked, "how long since last any invention or improvisation was required of them?"

Day after day, nothing. The fall into the shell was taking on the duration of a major interplanetary voyage. If they had to do it the hard way, it would take a month to cross the shell from side to side. Fair enough in normal conditions —during the Sasarenn affair McKay had been to Mars and back in the RLV without undue discomfort. But the RLV was not intended for long trips under rescue conditions. It was partly for this reason that McKay decided to part from the Furtherance derelict.

The burn, left to the last possible moment, was long and slow. McKay wanted to give any possible shell inhabitants plenty of chance to detect the fierce pinpoint creeping near the shrunken sun. Though it moved periastron out from the sun the burn didn't slow them down much—McKay had formed a plan so morally dubious that he wouldn't share it with the others meantime. Separating from the Furtherance wreck put all their tempers on edge, for the receding ship, slowly drawing sunward and ahead, was still carrying fuel the RLV had no tanks for. The motors of the other ship were hopelessly beyond repair—so, when the RLV had burned enough for their parting it would be separated, by precisely so much fuel, from further supply.

The mathematical perfection of the irony had sickened them all for days before but after commitment the atmosphere improved again. Another day reduced the tension still more when one of the Furtherance astronauts recovered. Though still wrapped in various casts and dressings the alien was well enough for the acceleration shielding to be withdrawn, leaving the rest much more room. The other survivor remained in a coma, sealed in at optimum temperature and pressure and better off there than in the sticky discomfort of the cabin. They used the space regained for a big clean-up and the new freedom of movement made the rest of the trip more comfortable. The passing of the sun was without incident. The

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sun itself was wholly quiet, not a flare or a flicker varying its even glow.

THEY fell for days through great tranquillity—days of mounting boredom, discomfort and frustration. No visual clues existed to the size or distance of the shell. "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams." In one near the end Plato himself, unobtrusively changing his tunic for a spacesuit, took McKay out of the ship to show him elusive shadows, huge and unrecognizable, moving on the dark face of the shell. There was no explanation. Perhaps great disembodied intelligences, unknowable to human senses, thronged the space around them and would never answer the RLV's call for help. But something had to be controlling the shell and McKay woke more determined than ever to force a response from it.

Awakening, he was plunged headlong into the crisis he had been heading off for days.

Argument raged on watch.

". . . how do we know any of this is real?" Devlin was shouting. "Maybe when the Interface hit the shell's surface we changed scale and all this is a tiny cavity inside the moon someplace—or even inside an atom! What we see as a solid shell could be an electron probability smear—"

"All right!" At moments like this McKay was glad to be the oldest man aboard. A sudden hush fell, though he had scarcely raised his voice. "How did we get into this crazy discussion?"

No immediate answer. "Walt?"

"I don't immediately remember, skipper. I think it was basically a question of whether the failure to make contact might not mean we had misinterpreted our whole environment here."

McKay swore. "Four weeks in space and you start shouting like children over that? Indestructible Slazeck of all people—I should have thought I could rely on you to keep Dev on the rails."

"Yeah, Mac. Sure."

"Okay. What time is it? No reply to the new program?"

"New program?"

McKay's blood ran very slightly cold. "I ordered you two and a half hours ago to begin beaming a new contact program into the impact area of the Furtherance derelict."

"Sure you did," said Devlin, as if recalling a minor chore. "I guess we didn't get around to it."

"You guess what? We've only six hours to impact!"

"What the hell, Mac?" said Slazeck. "If there's anyone down there to get the message they'll get it plain enough when Kiliath

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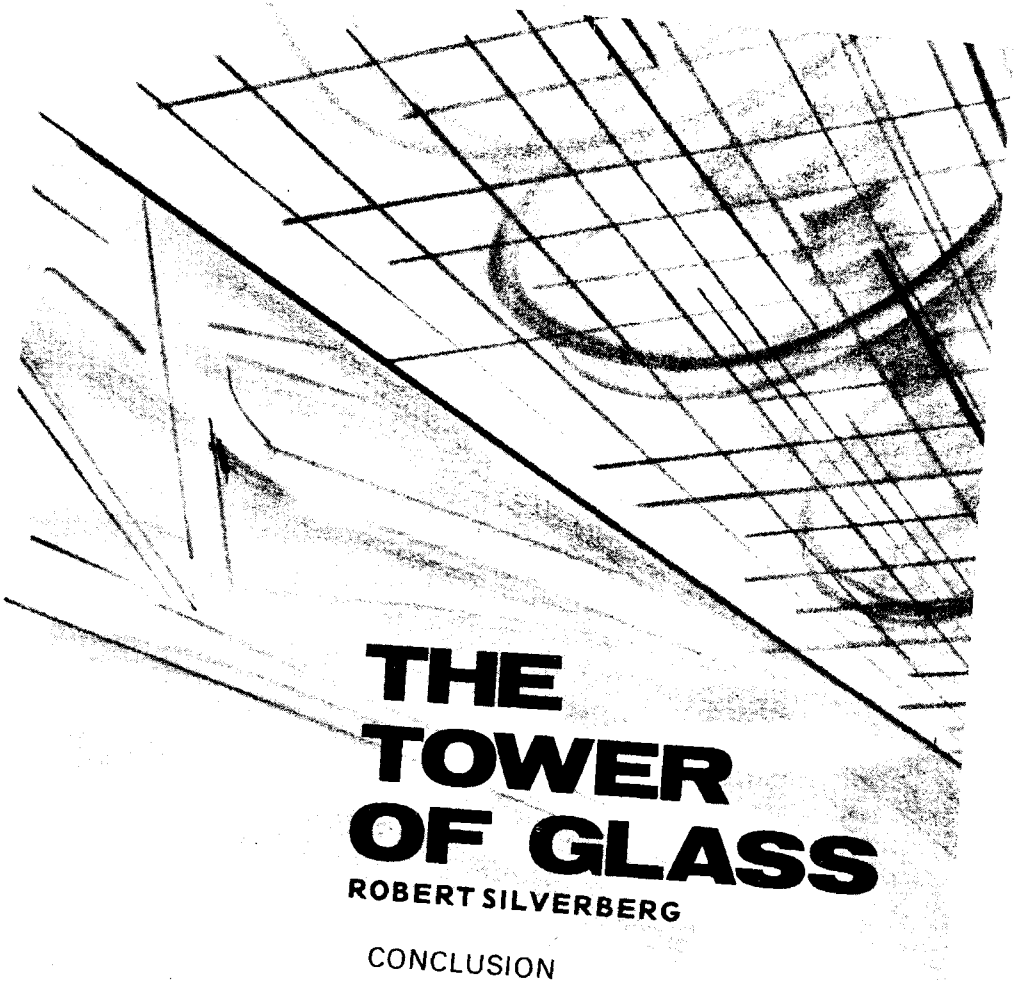

THE TOWER OF GLASS

ROBERT SILVERBERG

CONCLUSION

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

SIMEON KRUG, industrialist, master of life through genetics, creator of a world-wide subculture of androids to serve man, is driven by an overwhelming hunger to talk to the stars.

To this end he has begun the construction of an enormous glass tower in the Canadian Arctic, west of Hudson Bay. The tower will house tachyon-beam ultrawave communications equipment capable of reaching farther out than man has ever reached before. Thousands of androids work constantly on the project, headed by

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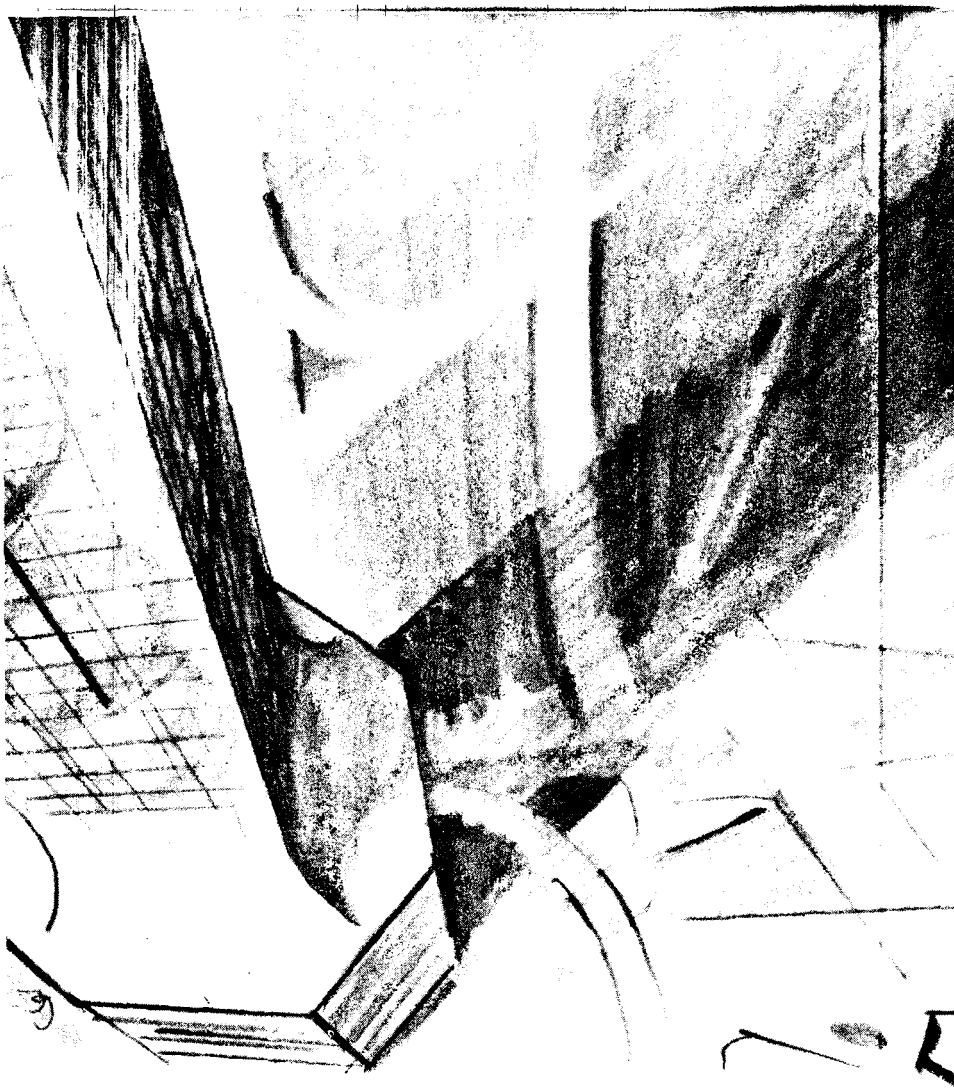

Thor Watchman, an Alpha android who is probably closer to Krug than any other human.

Unknown to Krug, androids worldwide worship him as god. A secret temple at the towersite is nearly discovered—Thor Watchman manages to divert attention by inventing an alarm about Krug's life being in danger. The situation backfires sharply when Krug simultaneously is accosted by two members of the Android Equality Party, a militant organization that has lost faith in Krug as a deity.

Krug's secretary, misunderstanding the scene, shoots and kills the female android. Watchman

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cools the ensuing imflammable situation. The secret chapel is moved to a new location—but suddenly around the Earth the Androids are uneasy.

IX

I AM Nick Ssu-ma Lloyd Tennyson Cadge Foster Will Mishima Jed Guilbert and maybe Manuel Krug, maybe. Maybe. A week in the shunt room. You come out, you don't even know who you are. Manuel Mishima? Cadge Krug? Anyway you can't be sure. Walk like Lloyd, laugh like Nick, shrug like Will. So on and so on. Everything a blur, a lovely golden haze, sunrise on the desert, like that. Their heads inside your head. Yours inside theirs. Only a week. Maybe that's why I like it so much. To stop being only me for a while. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Open the box. Jump out. Into them.

Full of funny ideas, now.

Bouncing in the stasis net for 168 hours. *Twong* and they split you open and you jump out and look for a place to land and you land *blong* and you're Nick Ssu-ma, eating roast dog on Taiwan. At dawn in the fog with your aunt. Both naked. She says, touch me here, you do, she laughs, you shiver. Touch me again. Now you laugh, she shivers. Tiny breasts, like Clissa's. This is our wedding night. With this ring I you do wed, Mrs. Ermine Tennyson, silken thighs, mole in small of back. He sleeps with an android, did you know that? Imagine Manuel doing that. He loves her, so he says. Look. Look here, he loves her, it's right here. You find your love where you can find it. An *android?* Well, at least he's not ashamed or he wouldn't be in here shunting with us. An android. I almost had one once but I couldn't. At the last moment. What does it feel going into one? Just like anyone else. They aren't plastic, you know. Even though there isn't any hair on it. Sort of incest, though. How? Well, Manuel's father makes the androids, doesn't he, so in a way she's his sister. Very clever. Very, very clever. Cruel bastard. But you like doing it? Of course I do. I'll show you. Here. Here. Shunt and see.

And he jumps across the net and slides into the slot. Who is he? Jed Ssu-ma? Will Tennyson? We are all one. Prowling my memories of Lilith. I don't mind. How can I want to keep secrets? My friends. My true friends.

When I was nine years old I Cadge Foster took a toad and cooked it and ate it,

When I was thirteen years old I Will Mishima pissed on the transmat floor because I was scared I wouldn't get there,

I Lloyd Tennyson put my finger in my sister's thing she eleven I eight

Jed Guilbert fourteen years old pushed a gamma off a loading rack fell eighty meters died squashed I told my father he slipped

I was ten Nick Ssu-ma a male beta at the back window said to mother he watched you and father in bed my father just smiled my mother had them kill him

I Manuel Krug almost thirty

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years old deceive my wife Clissa with Alpha Lilith Meson whom I love whom I love whom I love of Stockholm she lives on Birger Jarlsgaten Alpha Lilith Meson with breasts and thighs and teeth and elbows with rosy skin whom I love whom I love whom I love no hair on it at all Lilith

And we shunt and shunt and shunt we hang dangling in the stasis net looping easily from mind to mind, floating, changing skulls as often as we please even though it runs up the charges, and I taste Cadge's toad and I wet Will's transmat and I smell Lloyd's sister on my finger and I kill Jed's gamma and I lie about Nick's beta and all of them go to bed with Lilith and they tell me afterward, yes, yes, we really ought to investigate these alpha women, you're a lucky bastard, Manuel, a lucky lucky lucky bastard

And I love her

Whom I love

And I see all the little hates and dirtinesses in their souls, my friends, but I see the strengths too, the good things, for it would be awful if we shunted and saw only the cooked toads and the puddles on the transmat floor. I see secret favors and modesties and loyalties and charities. I see how good my friends really are and I worry and I wonder—what do they see in me? Maybe they'll hate me when we come out of this. We shunt some more. We see what they see in us what we see in us in them.

A week is used up so fast!

Poor Manuel, they say, I never knew it was so bad for him. With all that money and he still feels guilty because he's got nothing to do with his life. Find a cause, Manuel. Find a cause. Find a cause. I tell them I'm trying. I'm looking.

They say what about the androids?

Should I? What would my father say? If he doesn't approve.

Don't worry about him. Do what you think is right. Clissa is in favor of equal rights for androids. If he blows up—let Clissa talk to him before you do. Why should he blow up? He's made his pile out of androids, now he can afford to let them vote. I bet they'd vote for him. You know all the androids are in love with your father? Yes. Sometimes I think it must be almost like a religion with them. The religion of Krug. Well it makes a sort of sense to worship your creator. Don't laugh. But I have to laugh. It's crazy androids bowing down to my father. To idols of him, I bet?

You're getting off the track, Manuel. If it worries you that you aren't doing anything important, become a crusader. Equal rights for androids. Up the androids! You bet, up the androids! That's unworthy of you. You're probably right.

We hear the gongs and we know our time is up.

We drop out of the net. We slide into our own heads. I'm told they do this part very, very, very, carefully, getting everybody into his own head.

As far as I know I am Manuel Krug.

They ease us out. There is a readaptation chamber on the far side of the net. We sit around for three, four hours, getting used to being

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individuals again. We look at each other strangely. Mostly we don't look at each other at all. Someone has been laughing too much with my mouth.

In the re-adaptation chamber they have more of those new toys, the blunt-edged cubes. Mine sends me a series of messages.

THE TIME IS NOW 0900 HOURS IN KARACHI

IS THIS THE FIRST TIME YOU'VE MET YOURSELF?

YOUR FATHER PROBABLY WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU

ONLY THE TRUE ANSWERS ARE FALSE

THEY HAVE SETTLED THE CASE OUT OF COURT

ONCE WE WERE ALL A GREAT DEAL WISER

The machine bores and frightens me. I hurl it aside. I am almost certain that I am neither Cadge Foster nor Lloyd Tennyson but I worry about the toad. I will go to Lilith as soon as I leave here. Perhaps I should speak to Clissa first. My father must be at his tower. How is that great erection coming along? Will he soon have messages from the stars to read on the winter nights?

"Gentlemen, we hope you'll shortly return," the smiling alpha tells us.

We go out. I am they. They are I. We are we.

We clasp hands solemnly. We head for the transmats. Virtuously, dutifully, I go to Clissa.

THE lawyers met three times in the week following the destruction of Alpha Cassandra Nucleus. The first meeting was held in the offices of Krug Enterprises, the second in the headquarters of Labrador Transmat General, the third in the board room of the Chase/Krug Building, Fairbanks. The Labrador Transmat people had suggested that Krug simply supply a new alpha, paying the costs of training her. Lou Fearon, acting as counsel for Krug, objected that this might expose his client to expenses of an amount that could not be determined in advance. Labrador Transmat recognized the justice of this position and a compromise was reached under the terms of which Krug Enterprises transferred to Labrador Transmat the title to one Duluth alpha female, untrained, and agreed to pay the costs of her training to a maximum of $10,000 fissionable. The total time consumed in these three meetings was two hours and twenty-one minutes. A contract was drawn and the civil suit was voided. Leon Spaulding initialed the agreement on behalf of Krug, who had gone to Luna to inspect a newly completed gravity pond for hemiplegics at Krug Medical Center in the Sea of Moscow.

November 17, 2218.

A delicate tracery of windblown snow lightly covers the area around Krug's tower—beyond the construction zone, the snow lies deeply mounded, iron-hard. A dry wind buffets the tower. Well ahead of schedule, it has topped five hundred meters and now is overwhelming in its crystalline splendor.

The eight-sided base yields im-

(Please turn to page 74)

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CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

LAWRENCE MAYER

It could have been air pollution, bomb-testing, population explosion, anything. But it's time to ask: What kind of world are we making?

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GLADYS GREEN, of West Los Angeles, had her baby on a sunny day, exactly on target. In the early afternoon she felt labor pains, called her mother and her husband, went to the hospital and in due course gave birth. Sidney Ginsburg, her doctor, delivered the child.

At her mother's insistence Gladys had a private room. She lay there, half-dozing. Her mother sat by her side, knitting a sweater. There were flowers everywhere.

Dr. Ginsburg said, "It's a beautiful baby, a beautiful boy."

She said, "Oh, yes, it's a darling baby, Sidney. I can't wait to hold him."

"There's just one small thing," Sidney said. "A slight anomaly. You can't call it a defect. It's got two teeth. Rather strange ones—fairly sharp, actually. We'll pull them, of course. Tomorrow. Very routine. No reason for alarm."

When he left her mother said, "I don't like those teeth. That must be Herman's side. The babies on our side were perfect."

To Gladys's mother Herman was nothing but a side. But to Gladys he was a husband and he had given her a child. She was grateful. But she let her mother talk.

They brought in the baby, red and wriggling. It was cute, she thought, but it did have odd-looking teeth. When it cried they were plain to see. She put the baby to her breast. It bit her quite savagely. She started bleeding and the baby's little tongue seemed to want to lick up the blood.

Gladys cried out from the pain. Her mother was grumbling about breast-feeding.

"It's a crazy idea. We used bottles in my day. What are you, a cow?"

But the baby would not drink, not from the breast, not from the bottle. They went ahead and pulled the teeth. Then the baby took no nourishment at all. It shriveled away. They fed it intravenously and called in specialists. The baby steadily lost weight. A few weeks later it died.

To his amazement, Sidney found this was no isolated case. All the other doctors had similar stories.

"Hundreds of babies have those teeth," said Dr. Hillman. "We pull them; they don't eat; then they die."

"It's an epidemic of teeth."

"What happens if you leave the teeth in? Do they live?" asked Dr. Schwartz.

The answer came quickly enough. Max Gold called from the clinic.

"Sidney, you won't believe it," he said. "You know, we have mothers that give birth in their homes. Well, they've been coming in later, complaining—the babies don't eat right. But the babies are okay. It's the mothers. You should

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see them—breasts, arms, legs all chewed up—it's the damnedest thing I ever saw in forty years of practice. Those babies drink blood."

"Max, is this possible? Vampires?"

"See for yourself. I don't know what to do. The mothers are frantic. Some of them are bleeding to death. They get infections—I mean it's horrible."

"Max, will they outgrow it? This habit?"

"How should I know? Ask Bela Lugosi," Max said.

GLADYS went home to an empty house and cried. She went from room to room crying. She looked at the empty crib and cried. Herman had to come home from work. She was beyond consolation.

Sidney prescribed tranquilizers and another child, the sooner the better. To get over the trauma, he said.

"In her weakened condition?" asked her mother.

But nobody listened.

"Sidney, will my baby have teeth if I have another one?" Gladys asked.

He shrugged. The papers were full of the problem now—nobody knew what to do. As far as anyone could tell the epidemic was centered in Los Angeles, with some outbursts in the desert southwest. There were isolated cases in Oregon and among the Navajos and about as far east as Denver.

"It's the atom bomb. They're testing near Las Vegas. It's got to be," Herman said.

The men he played poker with agreed. And all their wives were deathly afraid.

ONE thing was concurred in at all levels of government. The babies could not be left to die. That was murder. The very mention drew black words from the Catholic Church. A soul was a soul. Besides, the mothers loved these children, teeth and all.

Could the children be weaned away from blood? The answer was no. Autopsies showed that these babies had long, narrow stomachs, highly specialized, fit only for digestion of blood. Anatomically, it looked like a permanent arrangement. There was no question of outgrowing the taste.

Was there an alternative to human blood? The babies turned out to want nothing else. They had no desire for cow blood, goat's blood, monkey blood, any blood but their own. Force feeding was tried but, as it happened, non-human blood made the babies deathly ill. For short periods they could be fed intravenously but that was no long-run solution. So they went on, draining their parents of blood. On this diet they survived and grew. Many doctors insisted on vitamin pills as a supplement. The pills were dissolved, of course, in blood.

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Without pills the babies were pale and prone to flu.

GLADYS'S baby, another boy, was born slightly premature. It was an easy labor. But the news was bad. It was another one with teeth.

Her mother was all for extraction.

"You'll adopt a baby, look at cousin Norma, you'd never know her Lisa was adopted, it even looks like her."

But Gladys was adamant.

"I won't kill my baby. It's mine."

Her mother shouted. Herman wavered back and forth. While the debate raged the baby was fed with needles. It grew noticeably weak.

In the end Gladys won. They named the baby Mark, after her father, whose name was Morris; he was dead. Gladys drank extra milk and took iron pills. She was like a tiger. All her maternal instincts came to the fore. When she felt strong enough she demanded that the baby be brought in. It was a shriveled little thing—it looked half alive. She put it to her breast and sobbed as it sucked her blood.

"Oh, it's the image of Herman," she said. "I'm going to love it to my last ounce of life."

After a week they took it home. It was considerably more plump. At home life was difficult. They had no woman to help out, though Gladys's mother offered to pay. At first Gladys nursed her baby in secret, out of a vague sense of shame. The effort was wasted—the neighbors knew all. The truth was plain from one look at Mark's teeth. At any rate, vampires were no rarity by now. There were several on Gladys's block. Actually, it helped to know that they were there, that the city was full of other vampires. The parents were beginning to form clubs, to meet and discuss their mutual problems. The first meetings seemed awkward and strained—Gladys came home with sick headaches. But in the end it lessened the pain to talk to other suffering mothers and fathers. And they did exchange helpful hints.

A Mrs. Willoughby, for instance, explained that parents in their position were not really forced to stay around the house even when their babies were wee little ones. She kept a quart or two of fresh sterile blood in the refrigerator, in clean containers. Then, she and her husband felt free to go out to the theater or for dinner or to peoples' houses for supper or cards. She left the baby with sitters, the same as anybody. Her little girl seemed perfectly willing to lap good clean blood from a bowl or dish. It had to be slightly warmed, though—at least to room temperature. Some sitters were squeamish, but they soon located others who were not.

"The big thing is to get over the embarrassment, the shame," Mrs.

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Willoughby said. "Are you going to keep your child hidden forever? Bring him out in the open! The chances are the neighbors already know your secret. And they have blood-children of their own. You'd be surprised at how many vampires there are, here in L.A."

Another mother advised them not to be depressed.

"Buy a new hat. Go dancing. Stay alive!"

Dr. Argon from Cal. Tech. spoke on the causes of vampirism. It was a mutation, he explained and told them about genes and genetic change. As to what caused this mutation, no one yet knew. Perhaps something in the air. It was their bad luck to live in Los Angeles.

"But think of the sunshine and the orange juice," Dr. Argon said, smiling grimly.

Gladys thought that was terrible taste but the group leader, Mrs. Elsa Darling, said they had to learn to live and laugh.

"Look at the bright side," Elsa said. "No bottles, no nipples, no baby food to buy. We're going to have more babies, John and I, as soon as we can. And if they want blood we'll give them blood."

But it was easier said than done. Child-raising is a tiresome job under the best of circumstances. It was no joke, to give blood four times a day to a voracious infant. Despite the fluids and the iron pills, Gladys was constantly exhausted. The littlest thing made her tense, upset. One night her cousin Edna came over for bridge. They stayed up past one. Gladys crawled into bed and fell instantly asleep. The baby woke up at four, as usual, and began its loud howling for food.

"Herman, I just can't do it!"

She felt she had come to the end of her rope. He climbed out of bed, half in a daze. He picked up the baby and rocked it in his arms.

"Herman," Gladys wailed, "he doesn't want love—he wants blood."

He stared at the baby, then at Gladys. The baby screamed. Gladys screamed. Herman sighed. He unbuttoned his pajama tops and put the baby's mouth to his breast. Mark's lips brushed against that fat, hairy breast and he turned away. Gladys sobbed loudly from her bed. Herman cradled the baby in his arms, made shushing noises, then put the baby's mouth to the flabby flesh of his upper forearm. The wailing stopped in an instant. With a mixture of pleasure and disgust Herman felt his son's teeth slice at his skin till the blood flowed freely. They he heard the soft gurgling noise of ingestion. He looked away.

AFTER that Herman regularly helped. But the burden was mostly on Gladys.

"It's a mother's job," she said.

Besides, Herman had to work—

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he needed strength. Gladys grew pale. She lost weight. She caught colds easily. She aged noticeably. She stopped doing her hair. But she persevered.

The years went by. One by one, hopes dropped away. Science proved powerless to help them. Government labs experimented with artifical blood but without success. The only breakthrough was the use of blood drawn from one type of chimpanzee, fortified with drugs and antibodies and specially processed. The trouble was, no more than ten thousand of these chimpanzees existed in the world. The blood cost a hundred dollars a pint. It was more costly than truffles or the finest caviar. Only the very rich could dream of using it. For the Greens, it was out of the question.

Their whole life altered. Originally they had wanted many children. But now even one was too much. They had no energy left for a second child, even a normal one, and another vampire would surely kill Gladys. Herman gave up his dream of a houseful of daughters and sons. He was an only child himself and his parents were dead —the dream died hard.

Herman's relationship with Gladys, too, was different. The business of living overwhelmed them. Once they had been sweethearts, then husband and wife. Now they were slaves of a single master. At the core of their life together was the child—and the teeth.

When Mark was five they were forced to hire a wet-nurse. Herman's business was in trouble. Money was tight. But they had no choice. The child ate and ate; its needs for nourishment were more than its mother and father could supply. They scraped some cash together, refinanced their house—then they went to a lawyer they knew, who arranged things on a black-market basis. A prospect was flown in from South America. She was a young Indian girl named Maria. Her father was a Bolivian tin-miner, now dead—she was one of ten children. She was succulent and seventeen. She spoke no English. They agreed to pay, in addition to her plane fare and the lawyer's fee), a salary of sixty dollars a week, with one day off and room and board. In addition to feeding Mark she was to clean and dust the house when she could.

With her first sixty dollars she bought a portable phonograph, two rock-and-roll records, a bracelet and a dress. With her second week's pay, she bought a ticket on a Greyhound bus and ran away. Mark screamed. Gladys cried. Herman wrung his hands. The ticket from Bolivia and the lawyer's fee had bled them white.

It was the first of many bitter experiences. Costs mounted—the women came and went. Some of them lied about their health and infected the child. Some of them re-

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fused to go on with the feedings—some were slovenly and neglected the house. Life was a constant heartache.

Teeth or no teeth, the boy was hard to handle. He was an attractive child physically, with his Buddha-belly, his pink cheeks, his chocolate eyes, his curly hair. But how difficult he was! He toilet-trained late. He wet his bed. He screamed and had tantrums. He kicked and spat at people. He refused to say thank you and please. And he learned how to irritate his mother—most of all, most horribly of all—by leaping at aunts or at company or at strangers, biting their legs and lapping maliciously at their flowing blood.

Every moment of the day, every day of her life, Gladys pondered her tragedy. Why am I cursed, she asked. She had no answer. She sent him off to a special day school. This cost her fifty dollars a week. When he was out the door and into the schoolbus, she would collapse in bed again, totally exhausted. She would nap fitfully, then read a magazine and wonder—why was she cursed. And she would call her mother or her sister or a friend and cry on the phone. If only he would eat a hamburger, candy even, drink Coca-Cola—if he were only like regular children . . .

MARK played exclusively with others of his kind. Normally behaved children were not allowed to go near him—the parents were polite, of course, but Gladys knew. Her own sister avoided her. Her own sister, with her two buck-toothed simpering girl-brats. She never came by day with the girls—only at night and without them. You could invite her for coffee or lunch or dinner with the family but she always made excuses.

"Bite her, bite her, the bitch!" Gladys moaned to herself—she almost hoped that Mark would eat her or her brats alive. The nerve of her, not understanding her own sister's affliction, the nerve of her treating her own sister and her nephew as if they were filth. Fortunately there were parents down the block with vampire children. Not that she considered these children proper playmates for Mark. They were all simply horrible. Along with the teeth, it seemed, went a ferocious disposition. And when these children got together in somebody's yard or the family room they made the most fearful din, kicking and screaming and biting. The biting was not usually for the sake of food. It was plain aggressive biting. Food biting was different and rather horrible. It was associated, not with aggression but with love. When two of the children were especially attracted to each other they would hold hands, put their faces, one at a time, to each other's neck, gently slit the skin and drink some of the slowly oozing blood. It was almost like a kiss.

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This reaction was discovered quite early by one of the hordes of psychologists and psychiatrists that descended on the vampire children, observing, asking, watching, writing in notebooks. The day school was positively filled with them every day. They trooped in and out solemnly, constantly taking notes. Nothing seemed to fascinate them quite as much as this bite of love.

Vampires were on everybody's mind. There was always something in the newspaper about them. They were more and more common and spreading—north to San Francisco, as far East as Omaha, Nebraska. An isolated pocket of vampires broke out in the Pittsburgh area. But the central focus was still Los Angeles, where, in the peak year, one out of every three births was a vampire child. Then, quite suddenly, the situation stabilized—it even began a slight decline.

"They stopped testing those bombs, that's what," people said.

It was cold comfort to Herman and Gladys.

"Who needs a man on the moon?" Gladys would say, "They could spend that money on our boy."

And Herman would add: "We give money to all those foreign countries when we need it right here."

They watched the evening news and sighed.

"They throw away more money in a day than we see in ten years."

She said, "In a lifetime."

No matter how long the years, the hurt remained. Each time Gladys fed the boy her heart was broken—Herman's too, though he never complained. He grew silver and passive and fat. Gladys was paler and thinner and more and more ailing. Her mother died and she felt even more alone. They sat in front of their TV night after night after Mark had gone to bed. And Herman ate and Gladys cried until they went to bed.

AT FIVE he was naughty. At ten he was wild. At sixteen he was impossible to control. He wore sideburns. He had girls. He flunked in high school. He bought a motorcycle with his father's credit card. He was in with a terrible crowd.

There was no question, the vampires were different from other people—deeply and desperately hostile to the world. Normal people could hardly manage them. There were some exceptions. Gladys observed with hope and jealousy how nicely Melinda, a girl down the block, was doing.

"She plays the piano, she's on the honor roll. She's got the teeth but she's as sweet as can be. She's a joy to her mother and dad." She and Herman never said vampire. They always walked around the word. They used phrases like "the children with the teeth." Mark had no such reluctance. He flung the word in their faces. He taunted

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them with it. He jeered at them and tortured them.

His crowd was a vampire crowd, of course. It was a gang—they called themselves the Demons of Blood. On long dusty evenings they got on their motorcycles and went tearing up and down the streets, screaming and laughing. They beat up other young people who got in their way and sucked their blood. They broke one boy's glasses and bled him until he fainted. They broke into stores and smashed windows. They swaggered about, shouting filthy language, scratching dirty words on billboards.

Discipline had no effect. Speeches and tears were useless. Mark slammed the door and ran out when they tried to reason with him. He told them to drop dead. Gladys said she would—he was killing her by inches. As it was, she was bedridden half the time. Didn't he care? He shrugged.

At seventeen Mark dropped out of high school and spent his days hanging around the house, sleeping till noon, then roaming the streets at night. They threatened him with starvation, their ultimate weapon. He went back to school, more or less. In his senior year he got a girl in trouble. Herman paid for the girl's abortion. The incident took years off Gladys's life. Somehow he was graduated from high school. College was out of the question.

"What will you do, what kind of job?" his father asked.

Mark shrugged.

Even the Army had no use for vampires.

At eighteen he ran away and roamed the country with a gang of vampires, boys and girls. They must have stolen and terrorized their way from state to state—somehow, they were never caught. After a while Mark came back, borrowed money from his father, drank and gambled it away. He worked in a gas station for a while—until he had money for a fancier motorcycle. Then he quit his job.

When he was twenty he brought home a girl named Lisa and said they were going to get married. Neither Gladys nor Herman liked the looks of her—dirty and unkempt and she smoked and drank a lot. She was a vampire, of course. They wanted to know: Who were her people—what kind of folks were they? Mark refused to answer. They looked into it on their own. They found out her parents were people like themselves, ordinary people, suffering quietly and deeply with the pain. They all four decided it was good—maybe—if the children got married. Responsibility might bring them to their senses. The girl was probably pregnant, too.

Gladys's strength was ebbing now. But she rallied and made him a wedding in her home, a wedding to be proud of. The bride wore white. A few close relatives and

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friends from both sides were invited. Mark and his bride came in an hour before the ceremony, drunk and disheveled—it was ghastly. Gladys put the best face on the matter she could.

After the words, *I now pronounce you man and wife*—Mark bent over, bit Lisa on the neck and gently lapped at her blood.

She giggled.

"In public, in public," Gladys wailed and clutched at Herman in her agony.

Outside, a raucous gang, uninvited friends of the bride and groom, shrieked, drank whiskey and raced their motors.

Six months later the baby was born. It had two wicked teeth in the front of its mouth. That was happening now all over—vampires bred true. They tried to give the baby up for adoption but no one would take it.

"They're too spoiled to feed it," Gladys said.

"Maybe they're smart," Herman said. "What did it do to our lives?"

"If I had the strength I'd take it," Gladys said.

Lisa was no fit mother—she hit the baby, fed it only once in a while, left it at home while she went out to the bars with Mark and his friends. He, Mark, was even more indifferent. And he quarreled constantly with Lisa.

One day he walked out on her—for almost a year he stayed away.

"What kind of world is this?" Gladys asked anybody who would listen.

She was too sick to leave the house for weeks at a time. Nothing consoled her any more, not even cards. But she doted on her poor, scrawny grandchild, begged Lisa to bring it around and fed it secretly when she could, despite the strenuous opposition of her doctor.

One winter day, Herman came home and found Gladys stretched on the floor, unconscious. She was taken to the hospital immediately. She had the best of care but, despite all, she died the following week.

Mark came to the funeral, fidgeted and had nothing to say to his old man.

They buried Gladys under a dark, blustery sky. When they left the cemetery Mark said to Herman, "I'll see you around."

Then he went away.

HERMAN sat in the house all alone, watching TV. The announcer said a new epidemic of vampires had broken out. This time in New York. A dim light flickered in Herman's eyes. It was an uncanny thing, this race of beings, people who could only live by the blood of their very own kind. It was beyond his comprehension. But if everybody lived that way the whole human race would die out.

The voice on TV droned on.

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Science was still searching (it said) for the secret of artificial blood. Congress was pouring in money.

There had to be some better answer, Herman thought. Better than artificial blood. Keep them from happening—that was better. *They should ask me.* Herman sighed and thought of his anguished, wasted life. Had he done something wrong? His arms were still scarred from his long ordeal. All his hopes had been buried. And where was Mark now, his son? Whose blood was nourishing him now?

He shook his head sadly. He turned back to the set. After a while his eyes clouded over—he began to snore. Loud TV music blared in the empty house. ★

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The Magazine of Alternatives

OUT OF MINDSHOT

(Continued from page 23)

alized the fearful truth: that to someone who could read minds not only his ambitions but his worst weaknesses were like an open book.

So that, in fact, it was he himself, through his desire to suffer pain and humiliation, who gave Lesley the power she would never otherwise have possessed—to bring the broom slamming down on the nape of his neck and drive him into unconsciousness.

WHEN she had overcome the repugnance occasioned by her reaching into Braden's mind and sharing the distorted instincts there, Lesley freed herself from her bonds and tied him securely with the same rope. Having made him into a kind of parcel, she set off awkwardly to negotiate the side of the hill.

It was a long slow job but she made it with dawn purpling the sky, found his car where it had been left. She searched him for his keys, pushed him into the back seat and drove bumpily away.

Apparently without reason she stopped a couple of miles away among a ring of boulders and got out, leaving the engine running. She raised the hood and found the inlet of the oil supply. Carefully she scooped up sand and measured it into the pipe until the engine ground to a halt.

Then, just to make certain, she hunted for and found the drain-

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cock of the radiator, allowed the water to seep into the thirsty earth. She took Braden's own pocket knife and stabbed at each of the tires. Then she took a pencil from his pocket and wrote something on a scrap of paper.

He stirred and began to wake and she threw the paper and pencil blindly down on the seat near him and ran.

Much later that year a rambling prospector found what he had found a dozen times before—a clean-picked human skeleton in the dry sand. He shook his head and muttered the usual "Poor fella!" to his burro. A short distance further on he came across a car with its tires flat and the driver's door open and approached to see if it would give any clue to the identity of the dead man. But there was nothing except a scrap of paper lying on the seat with a few words scrawled on it in the sort of script one would expect from a poorly educated child.

Scratching his head, he read it aloud to the burro as if requesting an explanation.

"I don't care what happens to you here. My range is less than a thousand yards." ★

OIL-MAD BUG-EYED MONSTERS *(Continued from page 42)*

had learned more about being men they incorporated, leased some desert land, issued stock and, joy and calamity, struck oil.

He heard her screaming for help.

They were trying to save oil, not sell it—and the answer was the tank-farm gimmick. Paying for the erection of more storage tanks by issuing more growth stocks, they discovered tax angles so acute that they purchased an electric car manufacturing company in order to acquire its paper losses. As the years passed they became a conglomerate.

He cornered her between the gleaming dishwasher and the glittering refrigerator and heard her human voice gasping: "Don't look at me like that."

By this time the other eleven had become remote chairmen of boards of directors. Because he was the only one who continued direct contact with the public as a lease-man the unfriendly eleven had accused him of un-shell-like urges. They were afraid he might crack before they controlled the planet's oil, before the breeding fleet arrived. They said he took human risks, even driving on the freeway. If he were killed in an accident his autopsy might lead to their exposure.

He heard her gasp.

He felt the soft struggling of her body. Her carving knife clattered to the floor with an excitingly hard sound.

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Her human voice was saying, "Damn—damn—I can't stick you like a pig. So kiss me if that's what you're trying to do."

With his eyes closed he tried. She was so soft—the opposite of truly armored love—so horribly soft. He shrank back in normal revulsion. He opened his eyes. She had no shell at all. She opened hers.

As he fled through the dining room he heard her pursuing him. In the living room he snatched up his reassuringly hard attache case and held it in front of himself like a carapace which was too small. To his dismay, she advanced.

Smiling oddly she said, "Either I'm sorry or you're—what about my car—"

"Not as sorry as I am," he gasped and grabbed the lease from her coffee table. "I'll authorize delivery of your car—"

Desperately needing his, he rushed outside. He scuttled along the slippery sidewalk toward the shell-like security of his car. Shrilly stridulating—he felt so humiliated. He tried to assure himself that her signature on the lease was the only important thing. He had that. But tears were trickling down his hideously human cheeks.

At least he had seduced another drilling site, he thought as he drove ninety miles an hour along the freeway. He couldn't wait twenty-two more years for his wife's hard carapace. He pounded his forehead against the glinting steering wheel. His car swerved. He turned into the parking area above View Point, as if the sight of his oil tanks could give him some relief.

He parked at the brink and tried sublimating, pouring himself an abstemious reward for getting her signature. With trembling hands, he opened another can of an adequate little 30-weight, non-detergent oil and sipped, attempting to restrain himself. Then he drank desperately. But the act only stimulated his loneliness.

He looked up at the empty gray sky, then glared out at the ocean, dark with wasted oil. At least he was more intelligent than humans, he thought, and glanced into his car's mirror at his obscenely huge, blue-eyed reflection. These monsters were raping their own world.

Those bulging eyes stared back at him like a madman's from the mirror. But he clacked quietly and more confidently to himself because he knew who he was. He felt as if he were armored again, secure and restrained. He knew he could wait twenty-two more years for his wife and the breeding fleet. It would be so heavily armored that—

He regained his poise. His gaze shifted between the oil-blackened ocean, jagged with human drilling platforms, and those bulging mad-blue eyes in the mirror.

He felt thankful he wasn't human. ★

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(Continued from page 60)

perceptibly to the planes of the four-sided trunk. The tower is haloed in light: sunglow rebounds from its flanks, strikes the surrounding fields of snow, leaps up again to kiss the glassy walls, is hurled groundward once more. Albedo reigns here—brightness is all.

The lower two-thirds of the existing structure has now been divided into floors and, as the androids assembling the skin of the tower pile the glass blocks ever higher, those responsible for the interior work follow them up.

Installation of the tachyon-beam system has begun. Five giant rods of brilliant red copper, sixty centimeters thick and hundreds of meters long will form a quintuple spine, rising inside vertical service cores that span close to half the tower's height. The lower sections of these great busbars are going into place now. A circular jacket of translucent glastic a meter in diameter forms the housing for each bar. The workmen slide forty-meter lengths of copper into these jackets, then cunningly fuse them end to end with quick, dazzling bursts of power from the eye of a welding laser. Elsewhere in the building hundreds of electricians supervise the spraying of conductive filaments into the tower's gleaming inner walls. Squadrons of mechanics install conduits, waveguides, frequency converters, fluxmeters, optical guidance accessories, focal plane locators, neutron activation foils, Mössbauer absorbers, multichannel pulse height analyzers, nuclear amplifiers, voltage converters, cryostats, transponders, resistance bridges, prisms, torsion testers, sensor clusters, degaussers, collimators, magnetic resonance cells, thermocouple amplifiers, accelerator reflectors, proton accumulators, and much more, everything carefully computer-tagged in advance with its floor level and flow-chart designation. Sending messages to the stars by tachyon-beam is not a simple project.

The tower is already a thing of unparalleled splendor, starkly supple, spectacularly spearing the sky. Visitors drive many kilometers out into the tundra to get the best view of it, for at close range it cannot properly be appreciated. Krug enjoys reminding his guests, though, that what they see today is merely the bottom third of the ultimate structure. To visualize the final building one must imagine a second tower of the same size piled atop this November spire and then a third one set atop that. The mind rebels. The image will not come. Instead, one can bring into view only the picture of a slender, impossibly attenuated, terribly frail needle of glass that hangs in the sky, seeking to put down roots, and, failing, topples and topples and topples, falling like Lucifer through all one long day, and shatters with a faint tinkle in the icy air.

X

"A NEW signal," Vargas said. "Slightly different. We began getting it last night."

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"Wait right there," said Krug. "I'm coming."

He was in New York. Almost immediately he was in Vargas' Antarctic observatory, high on the polar plateau, at a point equidistant between the Pole itself and the resorts of the Knox Coast. There were those who said that the transmat era had cheapened life in one way while enriching it in another: the theta force allowed one to flick blithely from Africa to Australia to Mexico to Siberia in a moment's merry dance, but it robbed one of any true sense of place and transition, of any feel for planetary geography. It transformed Earth into a single infinitely extended transmat cubicle. Krug had often resolved to take a leisurely tour of the world from the air and see desert shading into prairie, forest into bare tundra, mountains into plains. But he had not managed to find the time.

The observatory was a series of pleasant glossy domes sitting atop an ice sheet two and a half kilometers thick. Tunnels in the ice linked dome to dome and gave access also to the outlying apparatus: the vast dish of a radio telescope's parabolic antenna, the metal grid of an X-ray receiver, the burnished mirror that picked up relayed transmissions from the orbiting observatory high above the South Pole, the short, stocky multiple-diffraction optical telescope, the three golden spikes of the hydrogen antenna, the fluttering airborne webwork of a polyradar system and the rest of the devices with which the astronomers here kept watch on the universe. Instead of using refrigeration tapes to insure that the ice would not melt beneath the buildings, they had employed individual heat-exchange plaques for every structure, so that each building was a little island on the great glacier.

In the main building things hummed and clicked and flashed. Krug did not understand much about this equipment but it seemed properly scientific to him. Technicians ran eagerly about; an alpha high on a dizzying catwalk called numbers to three betas far below; periodically there was a crimson surge of energy within a glass helix twenty meters long and numbers leaped on a green and red counting mechanism at every discharge.

Vargas said, "Watch the radon coil. It's registering the impulses that we're getting right now. Here—a new cycle is starting—you see?"

Krug contemplated the pattern of surges.

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"That's it," Vargas said. "Now a six-second pause, and then it starts again."

"2-5-1, 2-3-1, 2-1," Krug said. "And it used to be 2-4-1, 2-5-1, 3-1. So they've dropped the 4-group altogether, they've moved the 5-group to the front of the cycle, they've completed the 3-group, they've added a pulse in the final

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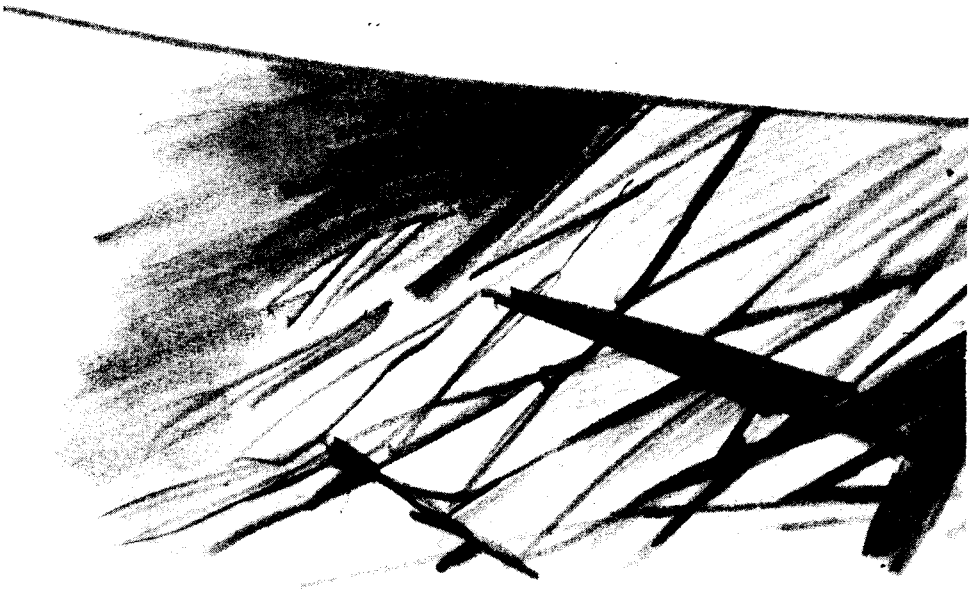

group—damn, Vargas, where's the sense? What's the significance?"

"We don't detect any more content in this message than in the last. They've both got the same basic structure. Just a minor rearrangement—"

"It's got to mean something!"

"Perhaps it does."

"How can we find out?"

"We'll ask them," Vargas said. "Soon. Through your tower."

Krug's shoulders slumped. He leaned forward, gripping the smooth cool green handles of some incomprehensible device jutting from the wall. "These messages are three hundred years old," he said blackly. "If this planet of theirs is like you tell me it is, that's like three hundred centuries here. More. They won't even know about the messages their ancestors sent out. They'll be mutated out of all recognition."

"No. There has to be continuity. They couldn't have reached a technological level that would allow them to send transgalactic messages at all unless they were able to retain the achievements of earlier generations."

Krug swung around. "You know something? This planetary nebula, this blue sun—I still don't believe it could have intelligent beings living there. Any kind of life—no! Listen, blue suns don't last long, Vargas. It takes millions of years for the surface of a planet to cool enough just to get solid. There isn't that much time, a blue sun. Any planets it's got, they're still molten. You want me to believe signals coming from people who live on a fireball?"

Vargas said quietly, "Those signals come from NGC seven-two-nine-three, the planetary nebula in Aquarius."

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"For sure?"

"I can show you all the data."

"Never mind. But how, a fireball?"

"It's not necessarily a fireball. Maybe some planets cool faster than others. We can't be sure how long it takes them to cool. We don't know how far the home world of the message-senders is from that sun. We've got models showing the theoretical possibility that a planet can cool fast enough, even with a blue sun, to allow—"

"It's a fireball, that planet," said Krug sullenly.

DEFENSIVE now, Vargas said, "Perhaps. Perhaps not. Even if it is: must all life-forms live on a solid-surface planet? Can't you conceive a civilization of high-temperature entities evolving on a world that hasn't cooled yet? If—"

Krug snorted in disgust. "Sending signals with machines made out of molten steel?"

"The signals don't have to be mechanical in origin. Suppose they can manipulate the molecular structure of—"

"You talk fairy tales to me, doctor. I go to a scientist, I get fairy tales!"

"At the moment fairy tales are the only way of accounting for the data," Vargas said.

"You know there's got to be a better way."

"All I know is that we're getting signals and they undoubtedly come from this planetary nebula. I know it isn't plausible. The universe doesn't have to seem plausible to us all the time. Its phenomena don't have to be readily explicable. Transmat wouldn't be plausible to an eighteenth-century scientist. We see the data as best we can and we try to account for

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it—and sometimes we do some wild guessing because the data we're getting doesn't seem to make sense. But—"

"The universe doesn't cheat," Krug said. "The universe plays fair."

Vargas smiled. "No doubt it does. But we need more data before we can explain NGC seven-two-nine-three. Meanwhile we make do with fairy tales."

Krug nodded. He closed his eyes and fondled dials and meters, while within him a monstrous raging impatience sizzled and blazed and bubbled. *Hey, you star people! Hey, you, sending those pulses! Who are you? What are you? Where are you? By damn, I want to know! Me. Krug. Krug.*

What are you trying to tell us, you?

Who are you looking for?

What's it all mean? Suppose I die before I find out!

"You know what I want?" Krug said suddenly. "To go outside, to that radio telescope of yours. And climb up into the big dish. And cup my hands and shout at those bastards with the numbers. What's the signal now? 2-5-1, 2-3-1, 2-1? It drives me crazy. We ought to answer them right now. Send some numbers: 4-10-2, 4-6-2, 4-2. Just to show them we're here."

"By radio transmission?" Vargas said. "It'll take three hundred years. The tower will be finished soon."

"Soon, sure. Soon. You ought to see it. Come see, next week. They're putting the gadgets in it now. We'll be talking to the bastards soon."

"Would you like to hear the audio signal coming in, the new one?"

"Sure."

Vargas touched a switch. From speakers in the laboratory wall came a dry cold hiss, the sound of space, the voice of the dark abyss. It was a sound like a cast-off snakeskin. Overriding that withered sound, seconds later, came sweet upper-frequency tones. *Pleep pleep.* Pause. *Pleep pleep pleep pleep pleep.* Pause. *Pleep.* Pause. Pause. *Pleep pleep.* Pause. *Pleep pleep pleep.* Pause. *Pleep.* Pause. Pause. *Pleep pleep.* Pause. *Pleep.* Silence. And then again, *pleep pleep,* the new cycle beginning.

"Beautiful," Krug whispered. "The music of the spheres. Oh, you mysterious bastards! Look, doctor, you come see the tower next week, next—oh, Tuesday. I'll have Spaulding call you. You'll be amazed. And listen, anything else new comes up, another change in the signal, I want to hear right away."

Pleep pleep pleep.

He headed for the transmat.

Pleep.

KRUG leaped northward along the meridian, following the line of 90° E., looped the North Pole and emerged beside his tower. He had sped from icy plateau to icy plateau, from the world's bottom to its top, from late spring to early winter, from day to night. Androids were busy everywhere. The tower seemed to have grown fifty meters since yesterday's visit. The sky was ablaze with the light of reflector plates. The song of NGC 7293 sang seductively in Krug's mind. *Pleep pleep. Pleep.*

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He found Thor Watchman in the control center, jacked in. The alpha, unaware of Krug's presence, seemed lost in a drugged dream, climbing the precipices of some distant interface. An awed beta offered to cut into the circuit and tell Watchman, via the computer, that Krug had arrived.

"No," Krug said. "He's busy. Don't bother him."

Pleep pleep pleep pleep pleep. He stood for a few moments, watching the play of expressions on Watchman's tranquil face. What was passing through the alpha's mind now? Freight invoices, transmat manifests, welding cues, weather reports, cost estimates, stress factors, personnel data? Krug felt pride geysering in his soul. Why not? He had plenty to be proud of. He had built the androids and the androids were building the tower—and soon man's voice would go forth to the stars.

Pleep pleep pleep. Pleep.

Affectionately, a little surprised at himself, he put his hands to Thor Watchman's broad shoulders in a quick embrace. Then he went out. He stood in the frigid blackness a short while, surveying the frenzied activity at every level of the tower. On top they were putting new blocks in place with flawless rhythm. Inside, the tiny figures were hauling neutrino-sheathing around, joining lengths of copper cable, installing floors, carrying the heat-cool-power-light system higher and higher. Through the night came a steady pulsation of sound, all the noises of construction blending into a single cosmic rhythm, a deep booming hum with regular soaring climaxes. The two sounds, the inner and the outer ones, met in Krug's mind, *boom* and *pleep, boom* and *pleep, boom* and *pleep.*

He walked toward the transmats, ignoring the knives of the Arctic wind.

Not bad for a poor man without much education, he told himself. This tower. These androids. Everything. He thought of the Krug of forty-five years ago, the Krug growing up miserable in a town in Illinois with grass in the middle of the streets. He hadn't dreamed much about sending messages to the stars then. He just wanted to make something out of himself. He wasn't anything, yet. Some Krug! Ignorant. Skinny. Pimpled. Sometimes on holocasts he heard people saying that mankind had entered a new golden age, with population down, social and racial tensions forgotten, a horde of servomechanisms to do all the dirty work. Yes. Yes. Fine. But even in a golden age somebody has to be on the bottom. Krug was. Father dead when he was five. Mother hooked on floaters, sensory scramblers, any kind of dream-pills. They got a little money, not much, from a welfare foundation. Robots? Robots were for other people. Half the time the data terminal, even, was shut off for unpaid bills. He never went through a transmat until he was nineteen. Never even left Illinois. He remembered himself: sullen, withdrawn, squint-eyed, sometimes going a week or two without speaking to anyone. He didn't read. He didn't play games. He dreamed a lot, though. He slid

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through school in a haze of rage, learning nothing. Slowly coming out of it when he was fifteen, propelled by that same rage, turning it suddenly outward instead of letting it fester within; *I show you what I can do, I get even with you all!* Self-programing his education. Servotechnology. Chemistry. He didn't learn basic science; he learned ways of putting things together. Sleep? Who needed sleep? Study. Study. Sweat. Build. A remarkable intuitive grasp of the structure of things, they said, was what he had. He found a backer in Chicago. The age of private capitalism was supposed to be dead; so was the age of free-lance invention. He built a better robot, anyway. Krug smiled, remembering: the transmat hop to New York, the conferences, the lawyers. And money in the bank. The new Thomas Edison. He was nineteen. He stocked his laboratory with equipment and looked for grander projects. At twenty-two, he started to create the androids. Took a while. Somewhere in those years, the probes began coming back from the near stars, empty. No advanced life-forms out there. He was secure enough now to divert some attention from business, to allow himself the luxury of wondering about man's place in the cosmos. He pondered. He quarreled with the popular theories of the uniqueness of man. Went on toiling, though, diddling with the nucleic acid, blending, hovering over centrifuges, straining his eyes, dipping his hands deep into tubs of slime, hooking together the protein chains, getting measurably closer to success. How can man be alone in the universe if one man himself can make life? Look how easy it is! I'm doing it: am I God? The vats seethed. Purple, green, gold, red, blue. And eventually life came forth. Androids shakily rising from the foaming chemicals. Fame. Money. Power. A wife; a son; a corporate empire. Properties on three worlds, five moons. Women, all he wanted. He had grown up to live his own adolescent fantasies. Krug smiled. The young skinny pimpled Krug was still here within this stocky man, angry, defiant, burning. You showed them, eh? You showed them! And now you'll reach the people in the stars. *Pleep pleep pleep. Boom.* The voice of Krug spanning the light-years. *Hello? Hello? Hello, you! This is Simeon Krug?* In retrospect he saw his whole life as a single shaped process, trending without detour or interruption toward this one goal. If he had not churned with intense, unfocused ambitions there would have been no androids. Without his androids, there would not have been sufficient skilled labor to build the tower. Without his tower—

XI

HE ENTERED the nearest transmat cubicle and set coordinates in a casual way, letting his fingers idly choose his destination. He stepped through the field and found himself in the California home of his son Manuel.

He hadn't planned to go there. He stood blinking in afternoon sunlight, shivering as a sudden wave of warmth struck his Arctic-

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tuned skin. Beneath his feet was a shining floor of dark red stone; the walls that rose on either side of him were coruscating swirls of light bursting from polyphase projectors mounted in the foundation; above him was no roof, only a repellor field set for the blue end of the spectrum, through which dangled the fruit-laden branches of some tree with feathery gray-green leaves. He could hear the roar of the surf. Half a dozen household androids, going about their domestic chores, gaped and goggled at him. He caught their awed whispers. "Krug . . . Krug . . ."

Clissa appeared. She wore a misty green wrap that revealed her small high breasts, her sharp-boned hips, her narrow shoulders.

"You didn't tell me you were—"

"I didn't know I was."

"I would have had something ready."

"Don't feel I need anything special. I'm just dropping in. Is Manuel—"

"He isn't here."

"No. Where?"

Clissa shrugged. "Out. Business, I guess. Not due back until dinnertime. Can I get you—"

"No. No. What a fine house you have, Clissa. Warm. Real. You and Manuel must be very happy here." He eyed her slender form. "It's such a good place for having children, too. The beach—the sun—the trees—"

An android brought two mirror-bright chairs, expanding and socketing them with a swift deft twinkle of his hands. Another turned on the waterfall on the inland side of the house. A third lit an aroma spike and the odor of cloves and cinnamon unfolded in the courtyard. A fourth offered Krug a tray of milky-looking sweets. He shook his head. He remained standing. So did Clissa. She looked uncomfortable.

She said, "We're still newlyweds, you know. We can wait a while for children."

"Two years, isn't it, you've been married? A long honeymoon."

"Well—"

"At least get your certificate. You could start thinking about children. I mean, it's time you—time I—a grandchild—"

She held forth the tray of sweets. Her face was pale—her eyes were like opals in a frosty mask. He shook his head again.

He said, "The androids do all the work of raising the kid, anyhow. And if you don't want to get yourself stretched you could have it ectogenetically, so—"

"Please?" she said softly. "We've talked about this before. I'm so tired today."

"I'm sorry." He cursed himself for pushing her too hard. His old mistake—subtlety was not his chief skill. "You're feeling all right?"

"Just fatigue," she said, not convincing him. She seemed to make an effort to show more energy. She gestured and one of her betas began to assemble a stack of glittering metal hoops that rotated mysteriously about some hidden axis—a new sculpture, Krug thought. A second android adjusted the walls, and he and Clissa were bathed in a cone of warm amber light. Music trembled in the air, coming from a cloud of tiny

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glittering speakers that floated, fine as dust, into the courtyard.

Clissa asked, too loudly, "How is your tower going?"

"Beautiful. Beautiful. You should see it."

"Perhaps I'll come, next week. If it isn't too cold there. Are you up to five hundred meters yet?"

"Past it. Rising all the time. Only not fast enough. I ache to see it finished, Clissa. To be able to use it. I'm so full of impatiences I'm sick with them."

"You do look a little strained today," she said. "Flushed, excited. You ought to slow down sometimes."

"Me? Slow? Why? Am I so old?" He realized he was barking at her. He said more temperately, "Look, maybe you're right. I don't know. I better leave now. I don't mean to be a bother for you. I just felt like a little visit." *Pleep pleep. Boom.* "You tell Manuel it was nothing special, yes? To say hello. When did I see him anyway? Two weeks, three? Not since right after he came out of that shunt room business. A man can visit his son sometimes." He reached out impulsively, drew her to him, hugged her lightly. He felt like a bear hugging a forest sprite. Her skin was cold through that misty wrap. She was all bones. He could snap her in half with a quick yank. What did she weigh, fifty kilos? Less? A child's body. Maybe she couldn't even have children. Krug found himself trying to imagine Manuel in bed with her and pushed the thought away, appalled. He kissed her chilly cheek. "You take care," he said. "So will I. We both take care, get lots of rest. You say hello to Manuel for me."

HE RUSHED to the transmat. Where to next? Krug felt feverish. His cheeks were flaming. He was adrift, floating on the broad bosom of the sea. Coordinates tumbled across his mind; frantic, he seized one set, fed it to the machine. *Pleep. Pleep. Pleep.* The scaly hiss of amplified starnoise nibbled at his brain. 2-5-1, 2-3-1, 2-1. Hello? Hello? The theta force devoured him.

It brought him forth inside an immense musty cavern.

There was a roof, dozens of dim kilometers overhead. There were walls, metallic, reflective, yellow-brown, curving toward some distant place of union. Harsh lights glared and flickered. Sharp-edged shadows stained the air. Construction noises sounded: crash, thunk, ping, bavoom. The place was full of busy androids. They clustered close to him, glistening with awe, nudging, whispering: "Krug . . . Krug . . . Krug . . . *Why do androids always look at me that way?* He scowled at them. He knew that perspiration was bursting from every pore. His legs were unsteady. Ask Spaulding for a cool-pill—but Spaulding was elsewhere. Krug was jumping solo today.

An alpha loomed before him. "We were not led to anticipate the pleasure of this visit, Mr. Krug."

"A whim. Simply passing through, looking in. Pardon me—your name?"

"Romulus Fusion, sir."

"How big a work-force here, Alpha Fusion?"

"Seven hundred betas, sir, and nine thousand gammas. The alpha

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staff is quite small—we rely on sensors for most supervisory functions. Shall I show you around? Would you like to see the lunar runabouts? The Jupiter modules? The starship, perhaps?"

The starship. The starship. Krug comprehended. He was in Denver, at Krug Enterprises' main North American vehicle-assembly center. In this spacious catacomb many types of transportation devices were manufactured, covering all needs that the transmat could not meet: ocean-crawlers, sliders for surface travel, stratospheric gliders, heavy-duty powerhaulers, immersion modules for use on high-pressure worlds, ion-drive systemships for short-hop spacing, interstellar probes, gravity boxes, skydivers, minirailers, sunscoops. Here, too, for the past seven years, a picked technical staff had been building the prototype of the first manned stargoing vessel. Lately, since the commencement of the tower, the starship had become a stepchild among Krug's projects.

"The starship," Krug said. "Yes. Please. Let's see it."

Aisles of betas opened for him as Romulus Fusion ushered him toward a small teardrop-shaped slider. With the alpha at the controls they slipped noiselessly along the floor of the plant, past racks of half-finished vehicles of every description, and came at length to a ramp leading to yet a lower level of this subterranean workshop. Down they went. The slider halted. They got out.

"This," said Romulus Fusion.

Krug beheld a curious vehicle a hundred meters long, with flaring vanes running from its needle-sharp nose to its squat, aggressive-looking tail. The dark red hull seemed to have been fashioned from conglomerated rubble—its texture was rough and knobby. No vision accesses were in evidence. The mass-ejectors were conventional in form, rectangular slots opening along the rear.

Romulus Fusion said, "It will be ready for flight-testing in three months. We estimate an acceleration capability of a constant two-point-four G, which of course will bring the vessel rapidly to a velocity not far short of that of light. Will you go inside?"

Krug nodded. Within, the ship seemed comfortable and not very unusual—he saw a control center, a recreation area, a power compartment and other features that would have been standard on any contemporary systemgoing ship.

"It can accomodate a crew of eight," the alpha told him. "In flight, an automatic deflector field surrounds the ship to ward off all oncoming free-floating particles, which of course could be enormously destructive at such velocities. The ship is totally self-programing—it needs no supervision. These are the personnel containers." Romulus Fusion indicated four double rows of black glass-faced freezer units, each two and a half meters long and a meter wide, mounted against a wall. "They employ conventional life-suspension technology," he said. "The ship's control system, at a signal from the crew or from a ground station, will automatically begin pumping the high-density coolant fluid into the containers, lowering

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the body temperature of personnel to the desired degree. They will then make the journey submerged in cold fluid serving the double purpose of slowing life-processes and insulating the crew against the effects of steady acceleration. Reversal of the life-suspension is just as simple. A maximum deepsleep period of forty years is planned. In the event of longer voyages, the crew will be awakened at forty-year intervals, put through an exercise program similar to that used in the training of new androids, and restored to the containers after a brief waking interval. In this way a voyage of virtually infinite length can be managed by the same crew."

"How long," Krug asked, "would it take this ship to reach a star three hundred light-years away?"

"Including the time needed for building up to maximum velocity, and the time required for deceleration," replied Romulus Fusion, "I'd estimate roughly six hundred and twenty years. Allowing for the expected relativistic time-dilation effects, apparent elapsed time aboard ship should be no more than twenty or twenty-five years, which means the entire voyage could be accomplished within the span of a single deepsleep period for the crew."

Krug grunted. That was fine for the crew—but if he sent the starship off to NGC 7293 next spring it would return to Earth in the thirty-fifth century. He would not be here to greet it. Yet he saw no alternative.

He said, "It'll fly by February?"

"Yes."

"Good. Start picking a crew: two alphas, two betas, four gammas. They'll blast off for a system of my choosing early next year."

"As you instruct, sir."

THEY left the ship. Krug ran his hands over its pebbled hull. His infatuation with the tachyon-beam tower had kept him from following the progress of the work here—he regretted that now. They had done a magnificent job. And, he saw, his assault on the stars would have to be a two-pronged effort. When the tower was complete he would attempt to open realtime communication with the beings whom Vargas insisted lived in NGC 7293; meanwhile, his android-staffed starship would be embarked on its slow journey outward. What would he send aboard it? The full record of man's accomplishments—yes, cubes galore, whole libraries, the entire musical repertoire, a hundred high-redundancy information systems. Make that crew four alphas, four betas—they'd need to be masters of communications techniques. While they slept he would beam tachyon-borne messages to them from Earth, detailing the knowledge that he expected to gain from the tower's contacts with the star-folk. Perhaps, by the time the starship reached its destination in the year 2850 or so, it would have become possible to give its crew access to dictionaries of the language of the race it was to visit. Whole encyclopedias, even. Annals of six centuries of tachyonbeam contact between Earthmen and the inhabitants of NGC 7293!

Krug clapped Romulus Fu-

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sion's shoulder. "Good work. You'll hear from me. Where's the transmat?"

"This way, sir."

Pleep. Pleep. Pleep.

Krug jumped back to the tower site.

Thor Watchman was no longer jacked into the master control center's computer. Krug found him inside the tower, on the fourth level up, overseeing the installation of a row of devices that looked like globes of butter mounted on a beaded glass string.

"What are these?" Krug demanded.

Watchman looked surprised to see his master appear so abruptly. "Circuitbreakers," he said, making a quick recovery. "In case of excessive positron flow—"

"All right. You know where I've been, Thor? Denver. Denver. I've seen the starship. I didn't realize—they've got it practically finished. Effective right now we're going to tie it into our project sequence."

"Sir?"

"Alpha Romulus Fusion is in charge out there. He's going to pick a crew, four alphas, four betas. We'll send them off next spring under life-suspension, cold-sleep. Right after we send our first signals to NGC seven-two-nine-three. Get in touch with him, coordinate the timing, yes? Oh—and another thing. Even though we're ahead of schedule here, it still isn't going fast enough to please me." *Boom. Boom.* The planetary nebula NGC 7293 sizzled and flared behind Krug's forehead. The heat of his skin evaporated his sweat as fast as it could burst from his pores. Getting too excited, he told himself. "When you finish work tonight, Thor, draw up a personnel requisition increasing the work crews by fifty per cent. Send it to Spaulding. You need more alphas, don't hesitate. Ask. Hire. Spend. Whatever." *Boom.* "I want the entire construction scheme reprogramed. Completion date three months tighter than the one we have now. Got it?"

Watchman seemed a little dazed. "Yes, Mr. Krug," he said faintly.

"Good. Yes. Good. Keep up the good work, Thor. Can't tell you how proud. How happy." *Boom. Boom. Boom. Pleep. Boom.* "We'll get you every skilled beta in the Western Hemisphere, if necessary. Eastern. Everywhere. Tower's got to be finished!" *Boom.* "Time! Time! Never enough time!"

Krug rushed away. Outside, in the cold night air, some of the frenzy left him. He stood quietly for a moment, savoring the sleek glimmering beauty of the tower, aglow against the black backdrop of the unlit tundra. He looked up. He saw the stars. He clenched his fist and shook it.

Krug! Krug! Krug! Krug!

Boom.

Into the transmat. Coordinates: Uganda. By the lake. Quenelle, waiting. Soft body, big breasts, thighs parted, belly heaving. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. 2-5-1, 2-3-1, 2-1. Krug leaped across the world.

XII

IN THE glare of crisp white winter sunlight a dozen alphas pa-

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raded solemnly across the broad plaza that fell, like a giant terraced apron, from the lap of the World Congress building in Geneva. Each of the alphas carried a demonstration-spool; each wore the emblem of the Android Equality Party. Security robots were stationed in the corners of the plaza; the snub-headed black machines would roll instantly forward, spewing immobilizing stasis tape, if the demonstrators deviated in any way from the agitation program they had filed with the Congressional doorkeeper. But the AEP people were not likely to do anything unexpected. They simply crossed the plaza again and again, marching neither too rigidly nor too slackly, keeping their eyes on the holovision hovercameras above them. Periodically, at a signal from their leader, Siegfried Fileclerk, one of the demonstrators would activate the circuitry of his demonstration-spool. From the nozzle of the spool a cloud of dense blue vapor would spurt upward to a height of perhaps twenty meters and remain there, tightly coalesced by kinesis-linkage into a spherical cloud, while a message imprinted in large and vivid golden letters emerged and moved slowly along its circumference. When the words had traveled the full 360° the cloud would dissipate—and only after the last strands of it had vanished from the air would Fileclerk signal for the next demonstrator to send up a statement.

Though Congress had been in session for some weeks now, it was improbable that any of the delegates inside the handsome building were paying attention to the demonstration. They had seen such demonstrations before. The purpose of the AEP group was merely to have the holovision people pick up and relay to viewers all over the world, in the name of news coverage, such slogans as these:

ANDROID EQUALITY NOW!
FORTY YEARS OF SLAVERY IS ENOUGH!
DID CASSANDRA NUCLEUS DIE IN VAIN?
WE APPEAL TO THE CONSCIENCES OF HUMANITY
ACTION! FREEDOM! ACTION!
ADMIT ANDROIDS TO CONGRESS—NOW!
THE TIME HAS COME
IF YOU PRICK US, DO WE NOT BLEED?

Thor Watchman kneeled beside Lilith Meson in the Valhallavägen chapel. It was the day of the Ceremony of the Opening of the Vat. Nine alphas were present, with Mazda Constructor, who belonged to the Transcender caste, officiating. A couple of betas had been persuaded to attend, since Yielders were needed. This was not a ceremony that required the participation of a Preserver, so Watchman played no part in it—he merely repeated to himself the invocations of the celebrants.

The hologram of Krug above the alter glistened and throbbed. The triplets of the genetic code around the walls seemed to melt and swirl as the ritual neared its climax. The scent of hydrogen was in the air. Mazda Constructor's gestures, always noble and impressive, grew more broad, more all-encompassing.

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"AUU GAU GGU GCU—"

"Harmony!" sang the first Yielder.

"Unity!" sang the second.

"*Perception*," Lilith said.

"CAC CGC CCC CUC—"

"Harmony!"

"Unity!"

"*Passion*," said Lilith.

"UAA UGA UCA UUA—"

"Harmony!"

"Unity!"

"*Purpose*," Lilith said and the ceremony was over. Mazda Constructor stepped down, flushed and weary. Lilith lightly touched his hand. The betas, looking grateful to be excused, slipped out the rear way. Watchman rose. He saw Andromeda Quark in the far corner, the dimmest corner, whispering some private devotion of the Projector caste. She seemed to see no one else.

"Shall we go?" Watchman said to Lilith. "I'll see you home."

"Kind of you," she said. Her part in the ceremony appeared to have left her aglow—her eyes were unnaturally bright, her breasts were beneath her thin wrap, her nostrils were flared. He escorted her to the street.

As they walked toward the nearby transmat he said, "Did the personnel requisition reach your office?"

"Yesterday. With a memo from Spaulding telling me to send out a hiring call at once. Where am I going to find that many skilled betas, Thor? What's going on?"

"What's going on is that Krug is pushing us hard. He's obsessed with finishing the tower."

"That's nothing new," Lilith said.

"It's getting worse. Day by day the impatience grows, deepens, becomes more intense, like a sickness inside him. Maybe if I were human I'd understand an inner drive like that. He comes to the tower two, three times a day, now. Counts the levels. Counts the newly raised blocks. Hounds the tachyon people, telling them to get their machines hooked up faster. He's starting to look like something wild: sweating, excited, stumbling over his own words. Now he's padding the work crews—tossing millions of dollars more into the job. For what? For what? And then this starship thing. I talked to Denver yesterday. Do you know, Lilith, he ignored that plant all last year and now he's there once a day? The starship has to be ready for an interstellar voyage within three months. Android crew. He's sending androids."

"Where?"

"Three hundred light-years away."

"He won't ask you to go, will he? Me?"

"Four alphas, four betas," Watchman said. "I haven't been told who's being considered. If he lets Spaulding decide, I'm finished. Krug preserve us from having to go." The irony of his prayer struck him belatedly and he laughed, a thin, dark chuckle. "Yes. Krug preserve us!"

They reached the transmat. Watchman began to set coordinates.

"Will you come up for a while?" Lilith asked.

"Glad to."

They stepped into the green glow together.

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HER flat was smaller than his, just a bedroom, a combination sitting-room / dining-room / kitchen and a sort of large foyer-cum-closet. It was possible to see where a much larger apartment had been divided to form several smaller ones, suitable for androids. The building was similar to the one where he lived: old, well-worn, somehow warm of soul. Nineteenth-century, he guessed, although Lilith's furnishings, reflecting the force of her personality, were distinctly contemporary, leaning heavily to floor-mounted projections and tiny, delicate free-floating art objects. Watchman had never been at her place before, though they were close neighbors in Stockholm. Androids, even alphas, did not socialize much in one another's homes—the chapels served as meeting-places for most occasions. Those who were outside the communion gathered in AEP offices or clung to their solitude.

He dropped into a springy, comfortable chair. "Care to corrode your mind?" Lilith asked. "I can offer all kinds of friendly substances. Weeds? Floaters? Scramblers? Even alcohol—liqueurs, brandies, whiskeys."

"You're well stocked with pollutions."

"Manuel comes here often. I must play hostess for him. What will you have?"

"Nothing," he said. "I'm not really fond of corrosion."

She laughed and moved toward the doppler. Quickly it consumed her wrap. Under it she wore nothing but a thermal spray, light green and lovely against her pale scarlet skin; it covered her from breasts to thighs, protecting her against Stockholm's December winds. A different setting of the doppler and that was gone too. She kept her sandals on.

Sinking down easily to the floor, she sat crosslegged before him and toyed with the dials of her wall-projections. Textures ebbed and flowed as she made random adjustments. There was an oddly tense moment of silence. Watchman felt awkward—he had known Lilith five years, nearly her whole life, and she was as close a friend to him as one android customarily was to another. Yet he had never been alone with her before in quite this way. It was not her nudity that disturbed him—nudity meant nothing at all to him. It was, he decided, simply the privacy of the moment.

As though we were lovers. As though there were something . . . sexual . . . between us . . .

He smiled and decided to tell her about these incongruous feelings. But before he could speak, she did.

"I've just had a thought. About Krug. About his impatience to finish the tower. Thor, what if he's dying?"

"Dying?" Blankly. An unfamiliar idea.

"Some terrible disease, something they can't fix tectogenetically. I don't know what—some new kind of cancer, maybe. Anyway, suppose he's just found out that he has maybe a year or two to live, you see, and he's desperate to get his space signals sent out before then."

"He looks healthy," Watchman said.

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"Rotting from the inside out. The first symptoms are erratic behavior—jumping obsessively from place to place, accelerating work schedules, bothering people to respond faster—"

"Krug preserve us, no!"

"Preserve Krug."

"I don't believe this, Lilith. Where did you get this notion? Has Manuel said anything?"

"Strictly intuition. I'm trying to help you account for Krug's odd behavior, that's all. If he really is dying, that's one possible explanation for—"

"Krug can't die."

"Can't?"

"You know what I mean. Mustn't. He's still young. He's got a century ahead of him, at least. And there's so much that he still must do in that time."

"For us, you mean?"

"Of course," Watchman said.

"The tower's burning him up, though. Consuming him. Thor, suppose he does die? Without having said the words—without having spoken out for us—"

"We'll have wasted a lot of energy in prayer, then. And the AEP will laugh in our faces."

"Shouldn't we do something?"

HE PRESSED his thumbs lightly against his eyelids. "We can't build our plans atop a fantasy, Lilith. As far as we know, Krug isn't dying and isn't likely to die for a long time."

"And if he does?"

"What are you getting at?"

She said, "We could start to make our move now."

"What?"

"The thing we discussed when

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you first pushed me into sleeping with Manuel. Using Manuel to enlist Krug's support for the cause."

"It was just a passing thought," Watchman said. "I doubt that it's philosophically proper to try to manipulate Krug like that. If we're sincere in our faith we should await His grace and mercy, without scheming to—"

"Stop it, Thor. I go to chapel and you go to chapel and we all go to chapel—but we also live in the real world and in the real world you have to take real factors into account. Such as the possibility of Krug's premature death."

"Well—" He shivered with tension. She was speaking pragmatically; she sounded almost like an AEP organizer. He saw the logic of her position. All of his faith was pinned to the hope of the manifestation of a miracle—but what if there were no miracle? If they had an opportunity to encourage the miracle, should they not take it? And yet—and yet—

She said, "Manuel's primed. He's ready to take up our cause openly. You know how pliable he is—I could turn him into a crusader in two or three weeks. I'd take him to Gamma Town first—"

"In disguise, I hope."

"Of course. We'd spend a night there. I'd rub his face in it. And then—you remember, Thor, we talked about letting him see a chapel—"

"Yes. Yes." Watchman trembled.

"I'd do that I'd explain the whole communion. And finally I'd come right out and ask him to go to his father for us. He would, Thor, he would! And Krug would listen. Krug would yield and say the words. As a favor to Manuel."

Watchman rose. He paced the room. "It seems almost blasphemous, though. We're supposed to wait for Krug's grace to descend on us in Krug's own time. To make use of Manuel this way, to attempt to shape and force the Will of Krug—"

"What if Krug's dying?" Lilith asked. "What if he's got only months left? What if a time comes when there is no Krug? And we're still slaves."

Her words rebounded from the walls, shattering him:

when there is no Krug
when there is no Krug
when there is no Krug
when there is no Krug

"We have to distinguish," he said shakily, "between the physical man who is Krug, for whom we work, and the eternal presence of Krug the Maker and Krug the Liberator, who—"

"Not now, Thor. Just tell me what should I do. Take Manuel to Gamma Town?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. But move one step at a time. Don't reveal things too quickly. Check with me if you have any doubts. Can you really control Manuel?"

"He worships me," Lilith said quietly.

"Because of your body?"

"It's a good body, Thor. But it's more than that. He wants to be dominated by an android. He's full of second-generation guilts. I captured him with sex but I hold him by the power of the Vat."

"Sex," Watchman said. "Captured him with sex. How? He has a wife. An attractive wife, I've heard,

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though of course I'm in no position to judge. If he has an attractive wife why does he need—"

Lilith laughed.

"Did I say a joke?"

"You don't understand a thing about humans, do you, Thor? The famous Alpha Watchman, totally baffled!" Her eyes sparkled. She jumped to her feet. The deep cones of her breasts swayed and jiggled. "Thor, do you know anything about sex? At first hand, I mean."

"Have I done sex? Is that what you're asking?"

"That's what I'm asking," Lilith told him.

The change in the conversation's direction puzzled him. What did his private life have to do with the planning of revolutionary tactics?

"No," he said. "Never. Why should I? What could I get from it besides trouble?"

"Pleasure," she suggested. "Krug created us with functional nervous systems. Sex is amusement. Sex excites me—it ought to excite you. Why haven't you ever tried it?"

"I don't know an alpha male who has. Or who even thinks much about it."

"Alpha women do."

"That's different. You have more opportunities. You've got all those human males running after you. Human females don't run after androids much, except for some disturbed women, I guess. And you can do sex with a human without any risks. But I'm not going to chance entangling myself with some human female, not when any man who thinks I'm infringing on his rights can destroy me on the spot."

"How about sex between android and android?"

"What for? So we can make babies?"

"Sex and reproduction are separate things, Thor. People have sex without babies and babies without sex all the time. Sex is a social force. A sport, a game. A kind of magnetism, body to body. It's what gives me power over Manuel Krug." Abruptly the tone of her voice shifted, losing its didactic quality, becoming softer. "Do you want me to show you what it is? Take your clothes off."

HE LAUGHED edgily. "Are you serious? You want sex with me?"

"Why not? Are you afraid?"

"Don't be absurd. I just didn't expect—I mean—it seems so incongruous, two androids going to bed together, Lilith—"

"Because we're things made out of plastic?" she said coldly.

"That isn't what I meant. Obviously we're flesh and blood!"

"But there are certain things that we don't have to do, because we come from the Vat. Certain bodily functions that are reserved for the Children of the Womb. Eh?"

"You're distorting my position."

"I know I am. I want to educate you, Thor. Here you are trying to manipulate the destinies of an entire society and you're ignorant of one of the most basic human motivations. Come—strip. Haven't you ever felt desire for a woman?"

"I don't know what desire is, Lilith."

"Really?"

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"Really."

She shook her head. "And you think we should have equality with humans? You want to vote, you want to put alphas in Congress, to have civil rights? But you're living like a robot. Like a machine. You're a walking argument for keeping androids in their place. You've closed off one of the most vital sectors of human life and tell yourself that that sort of stuff is only for humans—androids don't have to bother with it. Dangerous thinking, Thor! We are human. We have bodies. Why did Krug give us genitals if He didn't mean us to use them?"

"I agree with every word you've said. But—"

"But what?"

"But sex seems irrelevant to me. And I know that's a damning argument against our cause. I'm not the only alpha who feels this way, Lilith. We don't talk about it much but—" He looked away from her. "Maybe the humans are right. Maybe we are a lesser kind, artificial through and through, just a clever kind of robot made out of flesh and—"

"Wrong. Stand up, Thor. Come here."

He walked toward her. She took his hands and put them on her bare breasts.

"Squeeze them," she said. "Gently. Play with the nipples. You see how they get hard, how they stand up? That's a sign that I'm responding to your touch. It's a way that a woman shows desire. What do you feel when you touch my breasts, Thor?"

"The smoothness. The cool skin."

"What do you feel inside?"

"I don't know."

"Pulse rate changing? Tensions? A knot in your belly? Here. Touch my hip. My buttock. Slide your hand up and down. Anything, Thor?"

"I'm not sure. I'm new at this, Lilith."

"Strip," she said.

"It seems so mechanical this way. Cold. Isn't sex supposed to be preceded by courtship, soft lights, whispering, music, poetry?"

"Then you do know a little about it."

"A little. I've read their books. I know the rituals. The peripherals."

"We can try the peripherals. Here—I've turned down the lights. Take a floater, Thor. No, not a scrambler—not the first time. A floater. Fine. Here's a little music, now. Undress."

"You won't tell anybody about this?"

"How silly you are. Who would I tell? Manuel? Darling, I'll tell him, darling, I've been unfaithful to you with Thor Watchman!" She laughed giddily. "It'll be our secret. Call it a humanizing lesson. Humans have sex and you want to be more human, don't you? I'll discover sex to you." She smiled archly. She tugged at his clothes.

Curiosity seized him. He felt the floater going to work in his brain, lifting him toward euphoria. Lilith was right—the sexlessness of alphas was a paradox among people who claimed so intensely to be fully human. Or was sexlessness as general among alphas as he thought? Perhaps, busy with the tasks set for him by Krug, he had

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simply neglected to let his emotions develop? He thought of Siegfried Fileclerk weeping in the snow beside Cassandra Nucleus, and wondered.

His clothes dropped away.

Lilith drew him into her arms.

She rubbed her body slowly against his. He felt her thighs on his, the cool taut drum of her belly touching his, the hard nodes of her nipples brushing his chest. He searched himself for response. He was uncertain about what he found, although he could not deny that he enjoyed the tactile sensations of their contact. Her eyes were closed. Her lips were parted. They sought his. Her tongue slid a short distance between his teeth. He ran the palms of his hands down her back and on a sudden impulse dug the tips of his fingers into the globes of her buttocks. Lilith stiffened and pushed herself more intensely against him, grinding now instead of rubbing. They remained that way for some minutes. Then she relaxed and eased away from him.

"Well?" she asked. "Anything?"

"I like it," he said tentatively.

"Did it excite you, though?"

"I think so."

"It doesn't look that way."

"How can you tell?"

"It would show," she said, grinning at him.

HE FELT impossibly absurd and awkward. He felt cut off from his own identity, unable to return to or even to see the Thor Watchman he knew and understood. From the first, almost from the time of leaving the Vat, he had regarded himself as older, wiser, more competent, more confident, than his fellow alphas—a man who comprehended the world and his place in it. But now? Lilith had reduced him in half an hour to something clumsy, naive, foolish—and impotent.

"How would it show?" he asked doggedly.

"Don't you understand the mechanics of sexual intercourse?"

"Of course."

She put her hand to his loins. "Obviously it wasn't very exciting for you when I—" She paused. "Oh. Yes. *Now* do you see?"

"It happened when you touched me."

"That isn't awfully surprising. So you like it, then? Yes. Yes."

Her fingers moved cunningly. Watchman had to admit that he found the sensation interesting and that sudden startling awakening of his maleness in her hands was a remarkable effect. Yet he remained outside himself, a detached and remote observer, no more involved than if he were attending a lecture on the mating habits of Centaurine proteoids.

She was close against him, again. Her body moved, sliding from side to side, writhing a little, quivering with a barely suppressed tension. He clasped her in his arms. He ran his hands over her skin once more.

She drew him to the floor.

He braced himself with knees and elbows so that his full weight would not descend on her. Her legs surrounded him; her thighs clamped tight against his hips; her hand slipped between their bodies, seized him, guided him. He caught her rhythm shortly, and matched it.

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So this is sex . . .

He wondered how a woman felt—Lilith was gasping and trembling in what seemed like delight. But sex struck him as an odd thing to covet. Was pushing yourself into a woman all that thrilling? Was this what the poetry was about—was this what men had fought duels over and renounced kingdoms for?

After a while he said, "How will we know when it's over?"

Her eyes opened. He was unable to tell whether there was fury or laughter in them. "You'll know," she said. "Just keep moving!"

He kept moving.

The motions of her hips grew more violent. Her face became twisted, distorted, almost ugly—some sort of interior storm had broken and was raging within her. Muscles throbbed randomly throughout her body. At the place where he was joined to her, he could feel her grasping him with playful inner spasms.

Abruptly he felt a spasm of his own and ceased to catalog the effects their union had produced in her. He closed his eyes. He fought for breath. His heart raced frantically. His skin blazed. He tightened his grip on her and pressed his face into the hollow between her cheek and her shoulder. A series of jolting impacts rocked him.

She was right—it was easy to tell when it was over.

How fast the ecstasy drained away! He could barely remember now the powerful sensations of sixty seconds ago. He felt cheated, as though he had been promised a feast and had been given only dream-food to eat. Was that all? Like the surf trickling away after a brief surge of tide? And ashes on the beach. And ashes on the beach. *It is nothing at all,* Thor Watchman thought. *It is a fraud.*

He rolled free of her.

She lay with her head lolling back, her eyes closed, her mouth slack—she was sweat-dappled and wan-looking. It seemed to him that he had never seen this woman before. A moment after he had left her, her eyes opened. She propped herself up on one elbow and smiled at him, almost shyly, perhaps.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello." He looked away.

"How do you feel?"

Watchman shrugged. He searched for the right words and could not find them. Defeated, he said, "Tired, mostly. Hollow. Is that right? I feel—hollow."

"Normal. After coitus every animal is sad. Old Latin proverb. You're an animal, Thor. Don't forget it."

"A weary animal." Ashes on the cold beach. The tide very low. "Did you enjoy it, Lilith?"

"Couldn't you see? No, I suppose you didn't. I enjoyed. Very much."

He put his hand lightly on her thigh. "I'm glad. But I'm still baffled."

"By what?"

"The whole thing. The pattern, the constellation of events. Pushing. Pulling. Sweating. Groaning. The tickle in the groin, and then it's over. I—"

"No," she said. "Don't intellectualize. Don't analyze. You must have been expecting more than is really there. It's only fun, Thor. It's what people do to be

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happy together. That's all. That's all. It's not a cosmic experience."

"I'm sorry. I'm just a dumb android who doesn't—"

"Don't. You're a person, Thor."

He realized he was hurting her by his refusal to have been overwhelmed by their coupling. He was hurting himself. Slowly he got to his feet. His mood was wintry—he felt like an empty vessel lying in the snow. He had known a flash of joy, he thought, right at the moment of discharge—but was that instant of lightning worth anything if this dreary gloom always came afterward?

She had meant well. She had wanted to make him more human.

He lifted her, pulled her against him for a moment, kissed her glancingly on the cheek, cupped one of her breasts in his hand. He said, "We'll do this again some time, all right?"

"Whenever you say."

"It was very strange for me, the first time. It will get better."

"It will, Thor. The first time is always strange."

"I think I'd better go now."

"If you have to."

"I'd better. But I'll see you again soon."

"Yes." She touched his arms. "And in the meantime—I'll start moving along the lines we discussed. I'll take Manuel to Gamma Town."

"Good."

"Krug be with you, Thor."

"Krug be with you."

He began to dress.

XIII

And Krug said, There shall be this one difference forever upon you.

That the Children of the Womb shall come always from the Womb, and the Children of the Vat come always from the Vat. And it shall not be given to you to bring forth your young from your bodies, as is done among the Children of the Womb.

And this shall be so in order that your lives may flow only from Krug, that to him alone the glory of your creation be reserved, world without end.

December 20, 2218.

At 800 meters the tower dominates and overpowers. There is no resisting its immensity. One steps from the transmat by day or by night and one is struck dumb by that vaulting shaft of gleaming glass. The solitude of its surroundings lends awesomeness to its height.

It has passed the halfway mark now.

Lately there have been many accidents born of haste. A pair of workers fell from the summit; an electrician, spraying connectors improperly along a partition, sent a lethal shock through five gammas hoisting cable; two ascending scooprods collided, at a cost of six lives; Alpha Euclid Planner narrowly avoided serious injury when a power-pool backup sent a monstrous surge of maximum-entrophy data through the main computer while he was jacked in; three betas were dumped four hundred meters down an interior service-access core when a scaffold collapsed. The construction work thus far has caused the destruction of

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nearly thirty androids. But there are thousands employed at the tower and the work is hazardous and unusual; no one considers the accident rate extraordinarily high.

The first thirty meters of the tachyon-beam broadcast apparatus is virtually finished. Technicians daily test its structural integrity. It will not be possible, of course, to generate tachyons until the entire enormous accelerator track has been completed. But putting together the individual components of the mighty system has an interest of its own and Krug spends most of his time at the tower watching the tests. Colored lights flash; indicator panels hum and whistle; dials glow; needles quiver. Krug applauds each positive result enthusiastically. He brings hordes of guests. In the last three weeks he has come to the tower with Niccolo Vargas, with his daughter-in-law Clissa, with twenty-nine different members of Congress, with eleven leaders of industry, with sixteen world-famed representatives of the arts. There is unanimous praise for the tower. Even those who perhaps inwardly may think of it as a titanic folly cannot withhold their admiration for its elegance, its beauty, its magnitude. A folly, too, can be wonderful, and no one who has seen Krug's tower denies its wonder. Nor are there so many who think it is folly to notify the stars that man exists.

Manuel Krug has not been seen at the tower since early in November. Krug explains that his son is busy supervising the complexities of the Krug corporate domain. He is, assuming greater responsibilities every month. He is, after all, the heir apparent.

LAST time I went to Lilith she said, Next time you come let's do something a little different, all right?

Both of us naked after loving. My cheek on her breasts.

Different how?

To get out of the flat a little. To go around as a tourist and see Stockholm. The android quarter. To see how the people live, the androids. The gammas. Wouldn't you want to do that?

And I said, a little wary, Why should I? Wouldn't you rather spend the time with me?

She played with the hair on my chest. Such a beast, I am, so primitive.

She said, We live so cloistered here. You come, we have sex, you leave. We never go anywhere together. I'd like you to come outside with me. Part of your education. I have this drive to educate people, did you know that, Manuel? To open their minds to things. Have you ever been in a Gamma Town?

No.

Do you know what it is?

A place where gammas live, I suppose.

That's right. But you don't really know. Not till you've been inside one.

Dangerous?

Not really. Nobody will bother alphas in Gamma Town. They bother each other a little, sometimes, but that's different. We're high-caste and they keep away from us.

I said, They won't bother an al-

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pha, maybe, but what about me? They probably don't want human tourists if it's squalid and all that.

Lilith said she would disguise me. As an alpha. I'd go incognito. That had a certain kind of spice in it. Temptation. Mystery. I thought it might keep the romance glowing for Lilith and me, playing a game like that. I asked, Won't they recognize that I'm a fake? And she said, They don't look too closely at alphas. We have a concept called the social distances. Gammas keep the social distances, Manuel.

All right, then, we'll go to Gamma Town.

We planned it for a week from that day. I cleared everything with Clissa: going to Luna, I said, won't be back for a couple of days, yes? No problem. Clissa would spend the time with her friends in New Zealand. I wonder sometimes how much Clissa suspects. Or what she'd say if she knew. I have this temptation to tell her, Clissa, I've got an android mistress in Stockholm, she's way high spectrum in bed and a fantastic body, how do you like that? Clissa isn't bourgeois but she's sensitive. She might feel unwanted. Or maybe Clissa with her great love of the downtrodden androids might say, How kind of you, Manuel, to be making one of them so happy. I don't mind sharing your love with an android. Bring her to tea some day, won't you? I wonder.

The day comes. I go to Lilith's. I go in and she's naked. Get your clothes off, she says. I grin. Unsubtle. Sure. Sure. I strip and reach for her. She does a little dance step and leaves me holding air.

Not now, silly. When we come back. We've got to disguise you now!

She has a spraytube. First she turns it to neutral and covers up the mirror-plate in my forehead. Androids don't wear such things. The earlobe plugs, she says: out. I take them out and she fills the opening with gel. Then she starts spraying me red. Do I have to shave my body? I ask. No, she says, just don't take your clothes off in front of anybody. She turns me red all over, with a shiny texture to it. Instant android. Next she gives me a thermal spray from chest to thighs. Going to be cold out there, she says. Androids don't wear heavy clothes. Here. Here, get dressed.

She hands me a costume. High-neck shirt, skintight pants. Obviously android clothes and obviously alpha style, too. Fits me like a skin graft. Don't get an erection, she tells me. You'll split the trousers. She laughs and rubs me in front.

Where'd you get the clothes?

I borrowed them from Thor Watchman.

You tell him what for?

No, she says, of course not. I just said I needed some. Let's see how you look, now. Lovely. Lovely! A perfect alpha. Walk across the room. Back. Good. Swagger a little more. Remember, you're the end-product of human evolution, the finest version of *Homo sapiens* that ever came out of a vat, with all of a human's strong points and none of his flaws. You're Alpha—hmm. We need a name, in case anyone asks. Lilith thinks a moment. Alpha Leviticus Leaper, she

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says. What's your name?

Alpha Leviticus Leaper, I say.

No. If anyone asks you, you say Leviticus Leaper. They can tell you're an alpha. Other people call you Alpha Leaper. Clear?

Clear.

She gets dressed. A thermal spray first, then a kind of gold mesh over her breasts and down to mid-thigh. Nothing else. Nipples showing through the openings in the mesh. Not much hidden below, either. Not my idea of winter clothing. Androids must enjoy winters more than we do.

Want to see yourself before we go out, Alpha Leaper?

Yes.

She dumps mirror-dust in the air. When the molecules are lined up I get a head-to-toe view. Impressive. A really cocky alpha buck, a red devil out on the town. Lilith is right: no gamma would dare to fool with me. Or even look me in the eye.

Let's go, Alpha *Leaper*. Slumming in Gamma Town.

OUT. Across. To the edge of the city, looking down on wind-whipped gray water. Whitecaps in the harbor. Early afternoon but night already closing in—a greasy gray time of day, fog hanging low, the glow of streetlamps coming through it blurred and dirty. Other lights flashing off buildings or just floating overhead: red, green, blue, orange, flickering on and off, yelling for attention, an arrow here, the sign of a trumpet there. Vibrations. Fumes. Sounds. The closeness of many people. A screech in the grayness. Distant laughter, blurred also. Odd scraps of voices drifting in the fog:

"Let go or I'll clot you!"

"Back to the vat. Back to the vat."

"Slobies, who'll take slobbies?"

"Stackers can't tell you."

"Slobies!"

"Owl! Owl! Owl!"

Stockholm is more than half populated by androids. Why do they gather here? And in maybe nine other cities. Ghettoes. They don't have to. Transmat world. Live wherever you like, get to work anyway. But we like to be with our own kind, she says. And even so they stratify themselves in their ghettoes. The alphas back there, in the fine old houses, and the betas in the ragbag middle. And then the gammas. The gammas. Welcome to Gamma Town.

Wet slippery mud-streaked cobble-paved streets. Medieval? Peeling gray houses face to face, hardly a lane between them. A trickle of cold dirty water running down the gutter from the higher part. Windows of glass. And yet it isn't completely archaic here—a mixture of styles, all sorts of architecture, olla podrida, bouillabaisse, with twenty-second, twentieth, nineteenth, sixteenth, fourteenth centuries jumbled together. The airy webs of weatherproofed skyways dangling. Rusted slidewalks on a few of the tangled streets. The buzz of climate conditioners that have gone out of phase, pumping greenish fog into the winter air. Thick-walled baroque cellars. Lilith and I walk down zigzag crazy pathways. A demon must have planned this town. The imp of the preverse.

Faces hover.

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Gammas. Everywhere. They peer, flit, peer again. Little dim eyes, birdlike, twitch-twitch-twitch, frightened. Afraid of us, they are. The social distances, eh? They keep the social distances. They lurk, they stare, but as we get close they try to be invisible. Head down. Eyes averted. Alphas alphas alphas; all gammas beware!

We tower above them. I never realized how squat gammas are. How short, how broad. And how strong. Those shoulders. Those muscles rippling. Any of them could rip me apart. The women look strong, too, though they're built more gracefully. To go to bed with a gamma girl? More fire than Lilith, maybe—is that possible? Thrashing and jumping around, low-class groaning, no inhibitions? And the smell of garlic, no doubt. Forget the idea. Coarse, they are. Coarse. Coarse. Like Quenelle with my father, I'd say. Let them be—there's passion enough in Lilith and she's clean. Probably not worth the effort even to think about it. The gammas keep back from us. Two jaunty alphas out on the town. We have long legs. We have style. We have grace. They fear us.

I am Alpha Leviticus Leaper.

The wind is raw here. Right off the water it comes, knife-sharp. It stirs up dust and bits of things in the streets. Dust! Scraps! When have I seen such filthy streets? Don't the robocleaners ever come here? Well, then, don't the gammas have enough pride to clean their own?

They don't care about such things, says Lilith. It's a cultural matter. They take pride in their unpride. It reflects their lack of status. Bottom of the android world, bottom of the bottom of the human world and they know it. And they don't like it. The squalor is like a badge of nonstatus for them. Saying, you want us to be filth, we'll live in filth, too. Reveling in it. Wallowing in it. If we're not people, we don't have to be tidy at home. You know, robocleaners used to come here and the gammas would dismantle them. There's one now, you see? Been there ten years at least.

Robot fragments lie in a drab scattered heap. Shards of a metal man. The glint of good blue metal through the rust. Are those things solenoids? Relays? Accumulators? The coiled wire guts of the machine. Bottom of the bottom, a mere mechanical object, destroyed while attacking the holy squalor of our vat-born pariahs. A gray-and-white cat pisses on the robot's guts. The gammas leaning against the wall laugh. Then they see us and creep back, showing awe. They make quick nervous gestures with their left hands—touch crotch, touch breast, touch forehead, one two three very fast. As automatic, as much a reflex, as the sign of the Cross. What is it? A kind of honorific tugging at the forelock? A show of homage to the wandering alphas?

Something like that, says Lilith. But not quite. Actually it's just a superstitious sign they make.

To ward off the evil eye?

Yes. In a manner of speaking. Touch the cardinal points, invoke the spirit of genitals and souls and intelligence, crotch chest skull. You've never seen androids do it

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before?

I think maybe I have.

Even alphas, Lilith says. A habit. A comfort when tension . . . Sometimes even I.

Why the genitals, though? When androids don't genitate?

Symbolic power, she says. We're sterile but that's still a holy zone. In memory of the origin of us all. The human gene pool issued from the loins and we were designed after those genes. There's a theology of it.

I MAKE the sign. One two three. Lilith laughs but she looks edgy, as if I really shouldn't be doing it. To hell with. I'm masquerading as an android tonight, right? Then I can do android things. One two three.

The gammas lounging against the wall return the sign. One two three. Crotch chest skull.

One of them says something that sounds like Krug be praised.

What was that? I ask Lilith.

I didn't hear it.

Did he say Krug be praised?

Gammas will say anything sometimes.

I shook my head. Maybe he recognizes me, Lilith.

Not a chance. Absolutely none. If he said anything about Krug, he means your father.

Yes. Yes. True. He's Krug. I'm Manuel, only Manuel.

Shh! You're Alpha Leviticus Leaper!

Right. Sorry. Alpha Leviticus Leaper. Lev for short. Krug be praised? Maybe I didn't hear it right.

Maybe, Lilith says.

We turn a sharp corner and in so doing we trigger an advert trap. By entering the trap's scanner field we cause powders of many colors to erupt from vents in a wall and form, by electrostatic attraction, a pattern of gaudy words in the air, blindingly bright even in the murk and fog. Against a silvery backdrop we see:

!MEDIC!
ALPHA POSEIDON MUSKETEER
!MEDIC!
SPECIALIST IN GAMMA COMPLAINTS
HE CURES
SOLIDIFIERS
SLOBIE ADDICTS
STACKERS
HE CONQUERS
METABOLIC ROT AND DECAY
AND OTHER PROBLEMS
!REPUTABLE!
FIRST DOOR TO RIGHT AND RING

I ask, Is he really an alpha?

Of course.

What's he doing living in Gamma Town?

Somebody's got to be their doctor. You think a gamma can get a medical degree?

He sounds like a quack, though. Putting out a trap like this. What kind of doctor would huckster for patients?

A Gamma Town doctor. That's how things are done here. Anyway, he is a quack. A good doctor but a quack. Mixed up in some organ-regeneration scandal years ago, when he had an alpha practice. Lost his license.

You don't need a license here?

You don't need anything here. They say he's dedicated, though. Eccentric but devoted to his people. Would you like to meet him?

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No. No. What are slobie addicts?

Slobie's a drug the gammas take, Lilith says. You'll see some addicts before long.

And stackers?

They have something wrong in the brain. Scaly matter in the cerebellum.

Solidiflers?

A trouble in the muscles. Stiffening of tissue or something. I'm not sure. Only gammas get it.

I frown. Does my father know? He stands behind the integrity of his products. If gammas are prone to mysterious diseases—

That's a slobie addict, Lilith says.

An android comes up the street toward us. Drifting, floating, sliding, waltzing, moving with a weird molasses slowness. Eyes slitwide; face dreamy; arms outstretched; fingers drooping. Gropes his way as though going through the atmosphere of Jupiter. All he wears is a scrap of fabric around his hips, yet he sweats in the frosty evening air. Crooning to himself in a clanking way. After what seems like four hours he reaches us. Plants his feet, leans his head back, puts hands on hips. Silence. A minute. At last in low bristly voice he says with terrible unhurriedness, Al . . . phas . . . hel . . . lo . . . al . . . phas . . . love . . . ly . . . al . . . phas.

Lilith tells him to move along.

No response at first. Then his face crumbles. Unutterable sadness. Brings left hand up in awkward clownlike gesture, touches forehead, lets hand drift down to chest, to crotch. Making the sign in reverse—what's the significance of that? He says tragically, I . . . love . . . the . . . love . . . ly . . . al . . . phas.

I say to Lilith, What kind of drug is it?

Slows the time-sense. A minute becomes an hour to them. It stretches their free time. Of course, we move like whirlwinds around them. Usually the addicts stick together, all on the same time-scheme. Illusion of having days between each work-shift.

A dangerous drug?

She says, Cuts about an hour off the life expectancy for every two hours you're under the influence. The gammas figure it's a fair deal, though. Give up an hour objective, gain two or three days subjective—why not?

But it reduces the work force.

Gammas have the right to do what they please with their lives, don't they, Alpha Leaper? You wouldn't accept the argument that they're merely property, would you, and that any kind of self-abuse practiced by the gamma is a crime against its owner?

No. No. Of course not, Alpha Meson.

I didn't think you felt that way, Lilith says.

The slobie addict is moving in foolish vague circles around us, chanting something so slowly that I am unable to connect one syllable to another and can make no sense of it. He halts. A glacial smile spreads infinitely slowly across his lips; I think it is a snarl until it is half formed. He sinks into a hulking crouch. His hand rises, fingers flexed. The hand is obviously heading toward Lilith's left breast. Neither of us moves.

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I catch the gamma's chant now:

A . . . A . . . A . . . A . . . A . . . G . . . A . . . A . . . C . . . A . . . A . . . U . . .

What's he trying to say?

Lilith shakes her head. It isn't important.

She steps away while the groping hand is still ten centimeters from her bosom. A frown begins to replace the smile on the gamma's face. He looks wounded. His chant takes on a questioning tone:

A . . . U . . . A . . . A . . . U . . . G . . . A . . . U . . . C . . . A . . . U . . . U . . .

A SOUND of slow, dragging footsteps comes from behind me. A second slobie addict is approaching: a girl, wearing a cloak that hangs down from her shoulders and trails raggedly for many meters behind her, but leaves her thighs and loins bare. She has dyed her hair green and has it bound up in a kind of tiara. Her face seems wasted and pallid; her eyes are scarcely open; her skin is glossy with sweat. She floats toward our first friend and says something to him in a startling baritone boom. He replies dreamily. I can understand none of what they say. Is it because of the decelerating drug or do they speak a gamma patois? Something ugly seems to be about to happen. I nod to Lilith, suggesting we leave, but she shakes her head. Stay. Watch them.

The addicts are doing a grotesque dance. Fingertips touching, knees rising and falling. A gavotte for marble statues. A minuet for stuffed elephants.

They croon to one another. They circle one another. The man's feet become tangled in the girl's trailing cloak. She moves; he stays firm; the cloak rips, leaving the girl naked in the street. Between her breasts she has a knife, dangling from a green cord. Her back is criscrossed with scars. Has she been flogged? Her nakedness excites her. I see her nipples stiffening in slow motion, like two fungi rising on her chest. The man is next to her now. He reaches up with painful unhaste and takes the knife from its sheath. Just as slowly he brings it down and touches the cold metal to the girl's loins, her belly, her forehead. The holy sign. Lilith and I are against the wall, near the entrance to the doctor's office. The knife makes me uneasy.

Let me take it away from him, I say.

No. No. You're just a visitor here. This isn't your affair.

Then let's go, Lilith.

Wait. Watch.

Our friend is singing again. Letters, as before.

U . . . C . . . A . . . U . . . C . . . G . . . U . . . C . . . C . . .

His arm comes back, then starts forward. The point of the knife is aimed at the girl's abdomen. From the tension in his muscles I can see that the blow will have full force—this is no dance step. The blade is only a few centimeters from her skin when I rush forward and slap it from his hand.

He begins to moan.

The girl does not yet realize that she has been saved. She utters a deep droning bellow, perhaps intended to be a shriek. She drops to the ground, clutching her breasts

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with one hand, thrusting the other between her thighs. She writhes in slow motion.

You shouldn't have interfered, Lilith says angrily. Come on now. We'd better go.

But he would have killed her!

Not your affair. Not your affair.

She tugs at my wrist. I turn. We begin to move away. I am aware peripherally that the girl is getting up—the garish lights of the sign of Poseidon Musketeer the Medic glisten on her bare thin flanks. Lilith and I take two steps; then we hear a grunt. We look back. The girl, rising, has risen with the knife in her hand and she has driven it into the man's belly. Methodically she draws it upward from waist to chest. He makes a gurgling sound.

Now we've got to go, Lilith says.

We speed toward the corner. As we reach it I turn. The door of Alpha Musketeer has opened. A gaunt haggard figure, alpha-tall, with a mane of wild gray hair and bulging eyes, stands in it. Is this the famous medic? He rushes toward the slobie addicts. The girl kneels before her victim, who has not yet fallen. His blood purples her shining skin. She chants:

G!A!A!G!A!G!G!A!C!

In here, Lilith says and we duck into a dark doorway.

STEPS. A dry smell of withered things. Cobwebs. We plunge into unknown depths. In the distance, far below, yellow lights gleam. We go down and down and down.

What is this place? I ask.

Security tunnel. Built during the Sanity War two hundred years ago. Part of a system that runs everywhere under Stockholm. The gammas have taken it over.

Like a sewer.

I hear quick stabs of laughter, jagged blurts of incoherent conversation. There are shops down here, with slitted gates behind which little lamps sputter and flicker. Gammas move to and fro. Some of them make the one-two-three sign as they pass us. Driven by a fear I do not understand, Lilith leads us frantically onward. We change tunnels, entering a passage at right angles to the first one.

Three slobie addicts wander by.

A male gamma with face streaked by red and blue paint pauses to sing, perhaps to us:

Who shall I marry?
Who will marry me?
Fire in the stinking vat
Fire flying free.
My head my head my head
My head my head.

He kneels and gags. Thin blue fluid pours from his lips, almost to our feet.

We move on. We hear an echoing cry:

Al-*pha*! Al-*pha*! Al-*pha*! Al-*pha*!

Two gammas couple in an alcove. Their bodies are sweat-shiny and lean. Despite myself I watch the plunging hips and listen to the slap of flesh against flesh. The girl pounds the flats of her hands steadily against her partner's back. Is she protesting a rape or displaying ecstasy? I never find out, because a slobie stumbles out of

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the shadows and falls on them, tumbling in a turmoil of intertwined limbs. Lilith draws me away. I am suddenly heavy with desire for her. I think of the firm breasts beneath her wrap—shall we find an alcove of our own and couple among the gammas? I put my hand on her buttocks, taut as she walks. Lilith wriggles her hips. Not here, she says. Not here. We have social distances to keep, too.

A dazzle of light cascades from the tunnel's roof. Pink bubbles appear and burst, releasing sour smells. A dozen gammas gallop out of a side passage, halt in shock as they realize they have nearly collided with two visiting alphas, make signs of respect, and rush onward, shouting, laughing, singing.

Oh, I melt you and you melt me
And we melt they and happy we be.
Clot! Clot! Clot! Clot!
Grig!

They seem happy, I say.

Lilith nods. They're soaped to the whiskers, she says. On their way to a radiation orgy, I bet.

A what?

A puddle of yellow fluid slides out from under a closed door. Acrid fumes rise. Gamma urine? The door bursts open. Wild-eyed female gamma, luminescent breasts, livid scar on belly, giggles at us. She executes a respectable curtsey. Milady. Milord. Will you clot with me? Giggles. Squats. Lurches around, heels against rump, in a dizzy dance. Arches her back, slaps her breasts, spreads her legs. Green and gold lights blaze in the room from which she has emerged. A figure appears.

NORMAL height, but twice the width of a gamma, and covered with thick coarse fur. An ape? The face is human. It lifts its hands. Short blunt fingers—webs between them! Drags the girl back inside. Door closes.

A reject, Lilith says. There are lots of them here.

Reject from what?

Substandard android. Genetic flaws; impurities in the vat, perhaps. Sometimes they have no arms, sometimes no legs, no heads, no digestive tracts, no this, no that.

Aren't they automatically destroyed at the factory?

Lilith smiles. Can you keep a secret?

I promise.

They aren't destroyed. Those that aren't viable die anyway, fast enough. The others are smuggled out when the supervisors aren't looking and sent to one of the undercities. Mainly here. We can't put our idiot brethren to death, Manuel!

Leviticus, I say. Alpha Leviticus Leaper.

Yes. Look, there's another.

A nightmare figure rollicks through the corridor. Like something that has been placed in an oven until its flesh began to flow and run—the basic outlines are human but the contours are not. The nose is a trunk, the lips are saucers, the arms are of unequal length, the fingers are tentacles. The genitals are monstrous: horse-penis, bull-balls.

Better off dead, I say to Lilith.

No. No. Our brother. Our piti-

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ful brother whom we cherish.

The monstrosity halts a dozen meters from us. Its ropy arms go through the movements of the one-two-three.

Speaking perfectly clearly it says to us, The peace of Krug upon you, alphas. Go with Krug. Go with Krug. Go with Krug.

Krug be with you, Lilith replies.

The monstrosity shambles onward, murmuring happily.

The peace of Krug? Go with Krug? Krug be with you? Lilith, what does all this mean?

Common courtesy, she says. A friendly greeting.

Krug?

Krug made us all, did he not? she says.

I remember things that were said when I was in the shunt room with my friends. You know all the androids are in love with your father? Yes. Sometimes I think it must be almost like a religion with them. The religion of Krug. Well it makes a sort of sense to worship your creator. Don't laugh.

The peace of Krug. Go with Krug. Krug be with you.

Lilith, do androids think my father is God?

Lilith evades the question. We can talk about that some other time, she says. People have ears here. There are some things we can't discuss.

But.

Some other time!

I drop it. The tunnel now widens into a considerable room, well lit, crowded. A marketplace? Shops, booths, gammas everywhere. We are stared at. There are numerous rejects in the room, each a little more horrid than the last. It is hard to see how creatures so maimed and mismade can survive.

Do they ever go to the surface?

Never. They might be seen by humans.

In Gamma Town?

They take no chances. They'd all be obliterated if.

In the crush of the crowded room the androids jostle and shove, bicker, snap. Somehow they maintain an area of open space around the intrusive alphas, but not a very great one. Two knife-duels are going on; no one pays attention. There is much public lasciviousness. The smell of the place is rank and foul. A wild-eyed girl rushes up to me and whispers, Krug bless! Krug bless! She pushes something into my hand and runs off.

A gift.

A small cool cube with beveled edges, like the toy at the New Orleans shunt room. Does it send me messages? Yes. I see words forming and flowing and vanishing in its milky core:

A CLOT IN TIME SAVES THINE
*
HIS HIS HIS HIS HERS HIS HIS HIS
*
O SHALLOW IS THY BOWL, FILTHY GRIG
*
SLOBIE REIGNS, STACKERS PAINS
*
PLIT! PLIT! PLIT! PLIT! PLACK!
*
AND UNTO KRUG RENDER KRUG'S
*

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All nonsense. Lilith, can you figure this stuff?

Some of it. The gammas have their own slang, you know. But look here, where it says—

A MALE gamma with catered purple skin slaps the cube from our hands. It skitters along the floor. He dives for it in a knot of feet. There is a general uproar. People tangle and twine. The thief breaks from the mass and speeds away into a corridor. The gammas still wrestle confusedly. A girl rises to the top of the heap; she has lost her few scraps of clothing in the melee and there are bloody gouges on her breasts and thighs. In her hand she holds the cube. I recognize her as the girl who gave it to me in the first place. Now she makes a demonic face at me, baring her teeth. She brandishes the cube and clamps it between her legs. A burly reject pounces on her and hauls her away; he has only one arm but it is as thick as a tree. Grig! she screams. Prot! Gliss! They vanish.

The crowd is muttering in an ugly way.

I picture them turning on us, ripping at our clothes, revealing the hairy human body beneath my false alpha costume. The social distances may not protect us then.

Come, I say to Lilith. I think I've had enough.

Wait.

She turns to the gammas. She holds up her hands, palms facing, about half a meter apart, as though indicating the length of a fish she has caught. Then she wriggles in a peculiar sinuous maneuver, twisting her body so she describes a kind of spiraling curve. The gesture quiets the crowd instantly. The gammas step aside, heads bowed humbly, as we go past. All is well.

Enough, I tell Lilith. It's getting late. How long have we been here, anyway?

We can go now.

We flee through a maze of interlocking passages. Gammas of a thousand hideous shapes pass us. We see slobies floating in their slow raptures. Rejects. Stackers and solidifiers, for all I can tell. Sounds, smells, colors, textures—I am dazzled and dazed. Voices in the darkness. Songs.

The freedom day is coming
The freedom day is coming
Smip the slobies, grap the gliss—
And ride up to freedom!

Steps. Upward. Cold winds descending. Breathless, we race to the top and find ourselves in the winding cobbled streets of Gamma Town again, probably only a few meters from the place where we went down. It seems to me that the office of Alpha Poseidon Musketeer must be just around the corner.

Night has come. The lights of Gamma Town crackle and flutter. Lilith wants to take me to a tavern. I refuse. Home. Home. Enough. My mind is stained by the sights of the android world. She yields; we hurry out. How far must we walk before we reach a transmat?

We leap. Her flat seems so warm and bright to me now. We rid outselves of our clothes. Under the doppler I cleanse myself of my

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red color and my thermal spray.

Was it interesting?

Overpowering, I say. And there's so much you have to explain, Lilith.

Images swim in my brain. I burn. I sizzle.

Of course you won't tell anyone I took you, she says. I could get into awful trouble.

Of course. Strictly confidential.

Come close, Alpha Leaper.

Manuel.

Manuel. Come close.

First tell me what it means when they say Krug be—

Later. I'm cold. Warm me, Manuel.

I fold her in my arms. The heavy mounds of her breasts inflame me. I cover her mouth with mine. I thrust my tongue between her lips. We sink down together to the floor.

I touch her. She is hot and moist and ready. Our dark journey has heated her lusts as well as mine.

Without hesitation I spear her. She trembles. She clasps me.

When I close my eyes I see slobies and rejects and stackers.

Lilith.

Lilith.

Lilith.

Lilith I love you I love you I love you Lilith Lilith Lilith

The great vat bubbles. The moist crimson creatures crawl forth. Laughter. Lightning. O shallow is thy bowl, filthy grig! My flesh crashes against hers. Plit! Plit! Plit! Plit! Plack! With humiliating swiftness the overwrought Leviticus Leaper pours a billion little boys and girls into his beloved's sterile womb.

XIV

January 9, 2219.

The tower is at 940 meters and rising more swiftly than ever. Standing at the base, one cannot easily see the summit; it is lost against the white glare of the winter sky. At this time of year there are only a few hours of daylight at the site and during those hours the sun's rays ride fiery tracks down the length of the shimmering shaft.

Much of the interior structure now is complete throughout the building's lower half. Three of the high-capacity communications equipment modules have been hoisted into place: somber black metal containers fifty meters high, within which are the huge kickover units that will amplify the messages as they climb the tower. Viewed from afar, these modules seem to be giant seeds ripening in a great glossy transparent pod.

The accident rate continues to be high. Mortality levels are causing concern. The losses among gammas have been particularly severe. Yet morale is said to be good. The androids are cheerful and appear to be aware that they are playing an essential role in one of humanity's most ambitious projects. If their attitude remains so positive the tower will be finished well ahead of schedule.

AFTER showing them the state of progress at the tower Krug took his guests that day to dine at the Nemo Club, where a suite was perpetually held in readiness for him. The club was one of Krug's minor enterprises; he had built it a dozen years back and for some

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time it had been Earth's most fashionable gathering place, with reservations required at least six months in advance. Situated ten thousand meters under the western Pacific in the Challenger Deep, it consisted of fifteen pressurized bubbles through whose walls, fashioned of the same sturdy glass from which the tower was being constructed, it was possible to view the strange inhabitants of the dark abyss.

Krug's companions were Senator Henry Fearon and his brother Lou, the lawyer, of Fearon & Doheny; Franz Giudice of European Transmat; Leon Spaulding; and Mordecai Salah al-Din, the Speaker of Congress. To reach the Nemo Club they had journeyed by transmat to the island of Yap in the Caroline group of Micronesia, where they boarded an immersion module of the kind used for the exploration of Jupiter and Saturn. The density of the medium made transmat travel impossible under water. The pressures of the ocean's depths meant little to the immersion module, however, and at a calm and steady speed of seven hundred and fifty meters a minute it sank to the Pacific floor and entered the Nemo Club's transit hatch.

Floodlights bathed the abyss. The dwellers of the deep paid no heed to the illumination and came quite close to the club's glass walls: fragile, flimsy, unmuscular fishes, loose and flabby of body, their tissues pervaded by water under a compression of ten or twelve tons per square centimeter. Many of them were luminescent; cold pale glows glistened from photophores along their sides or between their eyes or on fleshy dangling lanterns jutting from their foreheads. The wavelength of the club's floodlights had been carefully chosen in order not to interfere with the luminescence of the fishes and their little sparkling beacons were plainly visible even in the brightness. Justin Maledetto, the architect of the tower, had also designed the club and Maledetto was clever in such details. Up to the walls the bizarre little monsters came, black and brown and scarlet and violet in hue. Many of them had jaws that unhinged, so that their mouths could gape down to their chests, ready to swallow enemies two or three times their own size. In the random encounters of the abyss pygmies devoured giants. Diners at the club were treated to visions of miniature gargoyles and horrors, sinister in their radiance, brandishing their savage teeth within their vast mouths, trailing strange appendages and protrusions, bearing eyes that bulged like globes—or eyes on stalked tubes or no eyes at all. One did not need to travel to distant worlds to behold bizarre beasts—the nightmare creatures were here, on man's own planet, and one had only to look. Huge spines, curved teeth so long that mouths could never close, branching stems rising from snouts, things that were all jaws and no body, things that were all tail and no head, anglers with twitching rods that danced about, giving off yellow or blue or green pulsations, grotesqueries of a thousand kinds—and no fish as much as half a meter long. The show was extraordinary and altogether unique.

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Krug ordered a simple meal – krill cocktail, algae soup, steak, Australian claret. He was no gourmet. The club offered every sort of delicacy but Krug never took advantage of its bounty. His companions had no such reluctance; cheerfully they called for Swedish oysters, benthic crabs, unborn squid, contrefilets of veal, snail mousse, breast of oryx, shirred euphorbia buds, manta tips, baked cycad hearts and more, all washed down by the world's finest golden wines. The waiter looked delighted at their prowess with the menu cubes. All waiters here were alphas; it was unusual to employ alphas in what was essentially menial personal service—but this was an unusual place and none of the staff at the Nemo Club appeared to be embittered at doing a job normally performed by betas or even gammas.

Yet the waiters could not have been entirely content with their station in life. When the appetizers had been served, Senator Fearon said to Krug, "Did you notice the AEP emblem on our boy's lapel?"

"Are you serious?"

"A very small one. Sharp eyes are needed."

Krug glanced at Spaulding. "When we leave, speak to the captain about that. I don't want any politics here."

"Especially revolutionary politics," said Franz Giudice, and laughed. The transmat executive, long and angular, was noted for his bland ironies. Though well past eighty, he had adopted the styles of dress of men half his age, mirror-plates and all, and retained astonishing vigor. "We'd better watch that waiter. With two members of Congress at the table, he's likely to slip propaganda into our dishes, and we'll all walk away converted."

"Do you really think the AEP is a threat?" Lou Fearon asked. "You know, I got a good dose of their Siegfried Fileclerk while I was handling the business of the alpha girl killed at the tower." He nodded toward Spaulding, who scowled. "I got the impression that Fileclerk and the whole AEP bunch are completely ineffectual," the attorney said.

"A minority movement," said Senator Fearon. "Not even commanding the support of the bulk of androids."

LEON SPAULDING nodded. The ectogene said, "Thor Watchman had some stinging words for Fileclerk and his party. Watchman doesn't seem to feel there's any value in the AEP whatever."

"An unusually shrewd and capable android, Thor is," said Krug.

"I was quite serious, though," Giudice declared. "You can laugh at the AEP all you like, but I feel its aims are genuinely revolutionary and that as it gains backing it will—"

Krug gestured for silence.

Their alpha waiter had returned, bearing a fresh bottle of wine. The men at the table sat tensely while the alpha poured. He went out, closing the hatch tightly behind him.

Mordecai Salah al-Din, the Speaker of Congress, said gently, "I've received at least five million

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petitions from the AEP. I've granted three audiences to the party's leaders. And I must say that they're a sincere and orderly group, worth taking seriously. I also want to say, though I wouldn't care to be quoted, that I'm sympathetic to some of their goals."

"Would you explain that?" Spaulding said, his voice crisp.

"Surely. I feel that the inclusion of a delegation of alphas in Congress is desirable and probably will come about within the next decade. I feel that the selling of alphas without their consent is improper and ought to be made illegal. I think that'll happen in fifteen to twenty years. I believe that we'll be extending full civil rights to alphas before 'fifty, to betas by the end of this century and to gammas not long afterward."

"A revolutionary!" cried Franz Giudice in wonder. "The Speaker is a revolutionary!"

"A visionary, rather," said Senator Fearon. "A man of vaulting insight and splendid compassion. As always, somewhat ahead of his time."

Spaulding shook his head. "Alphas in Congress, maybe, yes. As a safety valve, to keep them from getting out of control. Toss them a bone, you know? But the rest of it? No. No. Never. Mr. Salah al-Din, we should not forget that androids are mere *things*, the product of chemogenetic research, created in a factory, manufactured by Krug Enterprises to serve mankind—"

"Softly," Krug murmured. "You're getting excited."

Lou Fearon said, "Possibly the Speaker's right, Leon. Regardless of how they came into existence, they're more human than you're willing to admit. And as we gradually relax all arbitrary barriers of law and custom, as the Witherer ideals gradually take over—as I think you'll agree is quite subtly happening already—I expect that we'll go easier on the androids. At least on the alphas. We don't need to keep them under."

"What do you say, Simeon?" Franz Giudice demanded of Krug. "After all, they're your babies. When you decided to produce the first androids, did you ever imagine that they'd be calling for the rights of citizenship or did you think of them as—"

"Leon put it in the right words," Krug said. "How was it? *Things*. Factory-made things. I was building a better kind of robot. I wasn't building men."

"The borderline between man and android is so vague," Senator Fearon said. "Since the androids are genetically identical to us, the fact that they're synthetic—"

Krug said, "In one of my plants I can make you the Mona Lisa in perfect replica, so that it takes six months laboratory tests to prove it isn't the original. Yes? And so? Is it the original? The original still came out of Leonardo's studio. The replica came out of Krug's factory. I'd pay a billion for the original. I wouldn't give a brass thumb for the replica."

"Yet you recognize that Thor Watchman, for example, is an unusually capable and gifted person," said Lou Fearon, "and you give him wide responsibilities. I've heard it said that you trust him

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more than any man in your organization. Yet you wouldn't allow Thor to vote? You wouldn't give Thor a chance to protest if you decided to make him a waiter here? You agree that the law should give you the right to destroy Thor if the whim takes you?"

"I made Thor," Krug replied heavily. "He's the finest machine I have. I love and admire him the way I love and admire any superb machine. But I own Thor. Thor isn't a man—he's just a clever imitation of a man, a flawless imitation—and if I want to be so wasteful and foolish as to destroy Thor, why, I'll destroy him." Krug's hand began to tremble. He glared at it as if willing it to be still but the tremor intensified and a full glass of wine spilled onto the table. Stonily Krug said, "Destroy him. I never had anything else in mind when I brought out the androids. Servants. Tools of man. Cunning machines."

Sensors in the Nemo Club's service core announced the spilling of the wine. The waiter entered and efficiently mopped it up. Outside the window, a cluster of giant translucent crustaceans wheeled and danced.

When the alpha was gone again Senator Fearon said to Krug, "I didn't realize you felt this strongly about android equality. You've never spoken out."

"I've never been asked."

"Would you testify against the AEP," Salah al-Din asked, "if the matter were to come before Congress?"

Krug shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know. I stay out of politics. I'm a manufacturer. Businessman. Entrepreneur, you know? Why look for controversies?"

"If androids were granted civil rights," said Leon Spaulding, "it might have repercussions for Krug Enterprises. What I mean is—if you're manufacturing actual human beings you come under the scope of the population control laws, which—"

"Enough," Krug said. "It won't happen. I make the androids. I know them. There's a little group of malcontents, yes. Too intelligent for their own good. They think it's black slavery all over again. But it isn't. It isn't. The others know that. They're content. Thor Watchman is content. Why don't all the alphas back the AEP? They oppose it—and why? Because they think it's idiocy. They're treated well as is. This talk of selling alphas against their will, of killing them on whims, it's all just theory. No one sells a good alpha and nobody kills androids for fun, any more than people wreck their own houses for fun. No need for android rights, eh? The alphas realize it. The betas aren't worried. The gammas can't possibly care. So you see? Gentlemen, it makes good table talk, no more. The AEP will fade away. My respects, Mr. Speaker—your sweetness of soul leads you astray. You will have no alphas in your Congress."

Krug's lengthy speech had left him thirsty. He reached for his wine. Again the tension in his muscles betrayed him; again he knocked the glass over—again a watchful alpha, alerted by hidden eyes, rushed in to tidy the mess.

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Beyond the thick glass wall of the Nemo Club a dark red fish a meter in length, with a gigantic toothy satchel of a mouth and a narrow spiny tail, began to move through the school of crustaceans, gulping them down in a terrible hunger.

XV

January 15, 2219.

The tower is 1001 meters high. In celebration, Krug has decreed a holiday tomorrow for all workers. It is now estimated that the structure will reach its full height before the middle of March.

LILITH MESON said, "I had a visitor here yesterday morning, Thor."

"Manuel Krug?"

"No. Siegfried Fileclerk."

Watchman uncoiled himself from Lilith's all-engulfing tesseractdivan. "Fileclerk? Here? Why?"

Lilith laughed. "Are you so human these days that you feel jealously, Thor?"

"That doesn't amuse me. How did it happen that he came to you?"

"He was at the office," Lilith said. "You know, he's with Property Protection of Buenos Aires. He came in to discuss some new actuarial pivot clause in their contract. Afterward he asked me if he could see me home. All right. I invited him in. He seemed harmless."

"And?"

"He tried to recruit me for AEP."

"Is that all?"

"No," Lilith said. "He wants me to recruit you, too."

Watchman coughed. "A very slender chance of that."

"He's immensely earnest, Thor. Devoted to the cause of equality and liberation, et cetera, et cetera. Two minutes after we walked in he began burying me under arguments for political action. I told him I was religious. He said that didn't matter, that I could go right on praying for the miraculous intervention of Krug—but meanwhile would I please sign this petition? No, I said. I never sign things. He gave me a stack of propaganda cubes, the whole AEP line. They're in the kitchen—if you're interested. He was here more than an hour." Lilith flashed a dazzling grin. "I didn't sign his petition."

"Why did he go after you, though?" Watchman asked. "Does he plan to approach every alpha in the world, one by one, looking for support?"

"I told you. He wants you to sign up. He knows I'm close to you and he thinks that if he can persuade me I'll be able to persuade you. He said so in that many words. And once you're in his camp, everyone else will follow." Lilith drew herself up stiffly. "'If Alpha Watchman comes over to our side, Alpha Meson, he'll bring scores of influential alphas with him. It could be the turning point of our entire movement. Alpha Watchman may hold the future of every android in his grasp.' How do you feel about that, Alpha Watchman?"

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"Deeply moved, Alpha Meson. I can't begin to describe the awe that stirs in me at the idea. How did you manage to get rid of him?"

"By trying to seduce him."

"What?"

"Am I being bitchy, Thor? I won't talk about it if you'd rather I didn't."

"I was not programed to feel jealousy," Watchman said stolidly. "Teasing will get you nowhere with me. And I'm not in a mood to play stupid games."

She blinked.

"Very well. I'm sorry I said anything."

"Go on. You tried to seduce him. You didn't succeed?"

"No," Lilith said. "It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. I said to myself, Fileclerk is so stuffy that this will probably drive him away screaming. And if he takes the bait instead—well, it might be fun. So I stripped and then I—what's the idiom, the old word? I began to make overtures to him. To make overtures. Come on, I said, let's curl up together, Siggie. Siggie. I put my hands on him. I was very lewd. I jiggled and wiggled. I worked very hard, Thor, even harder than I had to work to seduce you. He wasn't having any. He asked me to stop."

"Of course," Watchman said. "It's as I was trying to explain. Male alphas don't really have much interest in sex. It's irrelevant to their life-pattern."

"Don't be so smug about that. Fileclerk wanted me. He was pale. He was shaking."

"Then why didn't he go to bed with you? Afraid to compromise himself politically?"

"No," Lilith said. "It's because he's still in mourning."

"Mourning."

"For his wife. Cassandra Nucleus. His *wife*, Thor. The AEP is advocating android marriage. He was married to Alpha Nucleus three years ago. He's observing a six-month mourning period, during which he doesn't intend to let wanton young alphas lure him into their arms. He explained it to me and then he left fast. As if he were afraid he might give in if he stayed."

"His wife," Watchman said.

"The AEP plans to add a clause about android marriage to its petition before Congress. Fileclerk also said that if you and I wanted to get married, Thor, he'd be able to arrange it the day we join the party."

WATCHMAN laughed harshly. "He talks like a child. What good is marriage? Do we have children who need legally constituted homes? If I wanted to live with you I'd live with you, Lilith. Or you with me. Should someone say words over us first? Give us a piece of paper?"

"It's the idea, Thor. Of a permanent union between man and woman, the way it is among humans. It's quite touching. He really loved her, Thor."

"I'm sure he did. I saw him weeping when Spaulding killed her. But did he love her more because they were married? If marriage is so wonderful why is Manuel Krug here every week? Shouldn't he be

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home having a permanent union with Mrs. Krug?"

"There are good marriages and bad marriages," Lilith said. "And who you sleep with isn't necessarily what determines how good your marriage is. In any case, Fileclerk's marriage was a good one and I don't see how it could hurt us to adopt the custom—if we truly believe in our equality."

"All right," Watchman snapped. "Do you want to marry me?"

"I was speaking in general terms about adopting the custom."

"I'm speaking in particular terms. We don't have to join the AEP to get married. I'll get hold of Alpha Constructor and Alpha Dispatcher and we'll write marriage ceremonies into the communion—and we'll get married at the chapel tonight. All right?"

"Be serious, Thor."

"I am."

"You're angry and you don't know what you're saying. You told me two minutes ago that you think marriage among androids is absurd. Now you're willing to write it into the communion. You can't mean it, Thor."

"You don't want to marry me? Don't worry—I wouldn't interfere with your affair with Manuel. I'm not programed for possessiveness either. But we could live together, we could—"

"Stop it, Thor."

"Why?"

"Whatever exists between us can exist without a marriage. You know that. I know that. I wasn't looking for a proposal. I was just trying to tell you something about Siegfried Fileclerk, about the nature of his emotions, the complexity of his feelings toward Alpha Nucleus as well as the position of the AEP on—"

"Enough. Enough." Watchman put his hands over his ears and closed his eyes. "End of conversation. I'm fascinated that you couldn't seduce Siggie Fileclerk and astounded that the AEP is going in for marrying—and that's the end. Yes?"

"You're in foul spirits today, Thor."

"I am."

"Why? Can I do anything to help?"

"Leon Spaulding told me something today, Lilith. He says that when the AEP delegation finally gets its turn to address Congress, Krug is going to release a statement denouncing the entire android equality movement and insisting that he never would have created us in the first place if he had known we'd demand civil rights."

Lilith gasped. Tears in her eyes, she made a Krug-preserve-us sign four times in succession.

"It isn't possible," she whispered.

"Spaulding said that Krug told him this about a week ago, at the Nemo Club, in the presence of Speaker Salah al-Din, Senator Fearon, and a couple of other people. You realize that Leon was merely making conversation when he passed the remark along to me, of course. A friendly chat between ectogene and android. He knows I'm anti-AEP—he thought I'd be amused. The bastard!"

"Can it be true?"

"Of course it can. Krug's never made any sort of statement on

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what he thinks the android's role ought to be. I've got no idea of his real position myself. I've always assumed he was sympathetic—but I might have been only projecting my own hopes. The question isn't can it be true—but is it true."

"Do you dare ask him?"

"I don't dare," Thor said. "I believe that this entire story originated inside Leon Spaulding's malicious mind, that Krug doesn't plan to break his no-politics rule and that if he ever did make a statement, Krug would make the statement that we all hope and pray for. But it frightens me to think that I'm wrong. I'm terrified, Lilith. An anti-equality statement from Krug would undermine every belief we have. Dump us into outer darkness. You see what I've been living with all day?"

"Should you rely just on what Spaulding said? Can't you check with Senator Fearon or the Speaker? Find out what was really said?"

"Ask them for confidential details of Krug's table talk, you mean? They'd report me to Krug right away."

"Then what will you do?"

"Force Krug's hand," Watchman said. "I want you to take Manuel to a chapel."

"How soon?"

"As soon as you can. Don't conceal a thing from him. Let him understand everything. Work on his conscience. Then send him to his father—before Krug makes any statements to Congress. If Krug is going to make a statement."

"I'll do it," Lilith said. "Yes."

WATCHMAN nodded. He looked down, moving his feet idly over the patterned floor. There was a ticking in his brain and a cottony fullness in his throat. He hated the maneuvers he found himself enmeshed in now, these ploys and counterploys, this staking of so much on the weak will of Manuel Krug, this assumption that Krug—Krug!—could be manipulated by simple one-to-one intrigues. All this seemed to negate true faith. It was a cynical kind of haggling with destiny, which left Watchman wondering how true his faith had ever been. Was it all a façade, then, the kneeling in chapel, the muttering of codon triplets, the immersion in Krugness, the yielding, the prayer? Just a way of filling time until the moment came to seize control of events? Watchman rejected the thought. But that left him with nothing. He wished he had never begun this. He longed to be back at the tower, jacked into the computer, buoyantly riding the data tide. *Is this what being human is like? These decisions, these doubts, these fears? Why not stay android, then? Accept the divine plan. Serve—and desire no more.* Step away from these conspiracies, these knotted emotions, these webs of passion. He found himself envying the gammas, who aspired to nothing. But he could not be a gamma. Krug had given him this mind. Krug had created him to doubt and suffer. Blessed be the Will of Krug! Rising,

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Watchman walked slowly across the room and, to escape himself, snapped on the holovision. The image of Krug's tower blossomed in the screen: immense, brilliant, beautiful, flashing in the January light. A hovercamera panned slowly along the entire length of it while the commentator spoke of the attainment of the thousand-meter level and compared the tower favorably to the Pyramids, the Great Wall of China, the Lighthouse at Alexandria, the Colossus of Rhodes. A magnificent achievement, opening the pathway toward communication with other races on distant stars. A thing of beauty in its own right, shimmering and sleek. Up and down the glass walls the camera leaped. The eye peered into the shaft from the summit. Grinning gammas waved back. Watchman caught a glimpse of himself, enmeshed in problems, unaware that he was being holovised. And there was Krug, aglow with pride, pointing out the tower's features to a crowd of Senators and industrialists. The chill of the tundra seemed to leak from the screen. The camera picked up the refrigeration tapes embedded in the permafrost; mist was rising from them. Unless the ground is kept frozen, the commentator explained, the stability of the tower would be uncertain. An unparalleled feat of environmental engineering. Miraculous. A monument to man's vision and determination. Yes. Yes. Phenomenal. With sudden ferocity Watchman blanked the screen. The shining tower vanished like an interrupted dream. He stood near the wall, his back to Lilith, trying to comprehend how it had happened that life had become so complex for him. He had wanted to be human. Yes. Had he not prayed to Krug that he and all his kind be granted the privileges of the Womb-born? Yes. Yes. And with the privileges went the responsibilities. Yes. And with the responsibilities went the turmoil. Rivalry. Sex. Love. Scheming.

Perhaps, Watchman thought, *I wasn't ready for all this. Perhaps I should have remained a decent hardworking alpha instead of rising up to challenge the Will of Krug.*

Perhaps. Perhaps. He went through the rituals of tranquillity —without success.

You are more human now than you really wished to be, Alpha Watchman.

He became aware of Lilith close behind him. The tips of her breasts grazed his back—as she drew closer he felt the heavy globes flattening and straining against him.

"Poor Thor," she murmured. "So tense. So worried. Do you want to make love?"

Could he refuse her? He pretended enthusiasm. He embraced her. Body slid tightly against body. She opened to him and he entered her. He was more skillful this time. But still it remained an empty thing for him, a butting of flesh, an alien ecstasy. He found no pleasure in it for himself, though there was indirect delight in seeing Lilith throb and moan and arch her back as she took pleasure from him.

I am not really human enough, despite everything—and she is much too human . . .

Yes. Yes. He moved more swiftly. Now he felt a tickle of sensa-

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tion—Krug had designed His people well and all the proper neural connections were there, damped though they might sometimes be by self-imposed conditioning. As the climax neared Watchman experienced some instants of genuine passion; he snorted, he clutched Lilith's buttocks with steely fingers, he bucked and thrust. Then came the spurt of completion and immediately afterward came, as before, the sadness, the awareness of hollowness. It seemed to him that he stood in a vast subterranean tomb, hundreds of meters long and many meters wide, with nothing in view but pinches of dust and fragments of dried wreaths. He forced himself to remain in Lilith's embrace, though he wanted nothing more than to roll away and be alone. He opened his eyes. She was weeping. She was smiling. She was flushed and sweat-sticky and aglow.

"I love you," she said softly.

Watchman hesitated. A response was required here. His silence, expanding into the succeeding seconds, threatened to choke the universe. How could he not reply? It was inhuman to remain silent. He touched her warm flesh. He felt untuned, unstrung.

Finally he said, quickly, getting it over with, "I love you, Lilith."

XVI

You may ask, Who was the Maker of the Children of the Womb? Who, indeed, was the Maker of Krug?

And I say to you that these are wise questions, that these questions are properly asked.

For you must understand that in the world there are cycles of all things, a cycle of the Womb and a cycle of the Vat, and the one precedes the other, so that it was necessary first for there to be the Womb-born in order that there might be the Vat-born.

And Krug the man was of the Womb-born, from whom sprang the Children of the Vat.

Yet Krug the man is merely one aspect of Krug the Creator, whose existence precedes all things and whose Will has shaped all things, and who brought forth the Children of the Womb as forerunners of the Children of the Vat. Therefore must you distinguish between the man Krug, who is mortal and was himself born of the Womb, and the Maker Krug, whose Plan all things follow; for if it was Krug the man who brought forth the Children of the Vat, nevertheless he did so by the design of Krug the Maker, from whom all blessings flow, to whom all praise be given.

I SAID to Lilith, You promised to tell me. Why those gammas were using my father's name. The peace of Krug. Go with Krug. Krug be with you. You never said.

I will.

When?

You'll have to dress up as an alpha again. It isn't something I can tell as easily as I can show.

Do we have to go back to Gamma Town?

No, she said, not this time. We can drop in on the betas this time. I wouldn't take you to the Valhallavägen chapel because—

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Where?

Valhallavägen chapel. Near here. It's where most of the local alphas worship. You couldn't fool them, Manuel. But you could fool betas, I think. If you kept quiet and looked dignified.

A chapel. Worship. So it's a religion?

Yes.

What's it called? Krugolatry?

It doesn't have a name. We talk of it just as the communion. It's very important to us, Manuel. I think it's the most important thing in our lives.

Do you want to describe—

Later. Take off your clothes and I'll spray your skin. We can go right now.

Will it take long?

An hour, she said. You'll be back home on time, don't worry. If that's what's worrying you.

I have to be fair to Clissa, I said. She gives me freedom. I don't want to abuse it.

All right. All right.

I took off my clothes. Once again Lilith disguised me as Alpha Leviticus Leaper. She had kept the clothes around from the other time; it surprised me that she hadn't given them back to Thor Watchman. As though she knew we'd be playing this masquerade again.

She said, Before we go—there are some things you have to know. The first is that it's absolutely forbidden for any human to enter a chapel. It's like non-Moslems going to Mecca. For all I know you may be the first Womb-born who ever went in.

The first what?

Womb-born. You're a Child of

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the Womb. We're Children of the Vat. Yes?

Oh. Oh. If it's a sacrilege to smuggle me into a chapel why are you doing it? Don't you take the rules seriously?

Very seriously.

Then why?

Because I feel I can make an exception for you, Manuel. You're different. I told you that once, remember? You don't put androids in some special sub-class of humanity. I think that inwardly you've been on our side all along, even without being conscious of it. And so it wouldn't be sacrilege to let you understand our religion a little.

Well, maybe.

And also you're Krug's son.

What does that have to do with it?

You'll see, she said.

I was flattered. Fascinated. Excited. A little frightened. Am I really that simpatico to android aspirations? Can I be trusted? Why is she breaking the commandment? What is she trying to get from me? Unworthy thought. She is doing it because she loves me. Her world.

She said, Anyway, keep in mind that it would be very serious if you were found out. Therefore pretend that you belong in there, and don't act nervous or uncertain of yourself. You were fine in Gamma Town. Be that way here.

But aren't there certain rites I ought to be familiar with? Genuflections or something?

I'm coming to that, Lilith said. You'll need a couple of gestures. One of them you already know. Like this.

Left hand to crotch, breast, forehead, one two three.

She said, That's the sign of Krug-be-praised. It's an act of homage. You make the sign when you first enter the chapel and when you start to join the prayer, silently or aloud. It's also good to make the sign whenever the name of Krug is mentioned. In fact, the Krug-be-praised sign is appropriate in almost any part of the service or whenever two androids of the communion meet outside a chapel. Let's see you make it. Go on.

One two three. Krug be praised.

Faster. One-two-three.

One-two-three.

Good. Good. Now, here's another important sign. Its meaning is Krug-preserve-us and it's specifically a prayer used in time of tension or doubt. Like saying God help us. You'll use it whenever the text of the service calls for Krug to have mercy on us, Krug to aid us in any way. Whenever we're imploring Krug.

Krug is really your god, I said, wondering.

This is the sign. She showed me how to make it. Cup one hand over each breast—then turn the palms outward. An act of contrition: see my soul, Krug! My heart is bare to you. She made the sign several times, and I followed her.

One more, Lilith said. The sign of submission to the Will of Krug. You'll make it only once, when you first get into line of sight with the altar. Like this. Drop to one knee and reach your arms forward, palms turned up.

Does it matter which knee?

Either one. Do it.

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I made the sign of submission to the Will of Krug. I was glad to learn it. Somehow I felt that I'd been submitting to the Will of Krug all my life without even knowing it.

Lilith said, Let's make sure you have it all clear, now. When you enter the chapel, what?

One-two-three. Krug-be-praised.

Good. Then?

When I can see the altar, I do the submission to the Will. Down on one knee, hands out, palms up.

Yes. And?

When the favors are asked of Krug. I do Krug-preserve-us. Hands to breasts, turn hands out. I also do Krug-be-praised from time to time when the name of Krug is mentioned.

Fine. Fine. You won't have any trouble, Manuel.

There's another gesture I saw you make in Gamma Town, I said.

Show me.

I HELD my hands up with the palms facing each other about half a meter apart, and wiggled my hips and flexed my knees, making a kind of spiral.

You did it in Gamma Town, I said, when the mob was getting a little wild.

Lilith laughed. It's called the Blessing of the Vat, she said. It's a sign of peace and a sign of departure. We do it over a dead person in the final prayer, and we do it when we're saying goodbye to one another in a tense situation. It's one of the holiest signs. And you didn't do it very well. You see, it's based on the double helix of the nucleic acid molecule—genetics, yes?—the way the molecules are coiled. We try to duplicate it with our bodies. This way.

She did it. I imitated. She laughed.

I said, I'm sorry. My body just doesn't bend that way.

It takes practice. You won't have to do it, though. Stick with Krug-be-praised and Krug-preserve-us and you'll be fine. Let's go now.

She took me to a shabby part of town in what I think once was a commercial section. It didn't have the nightmare gaudiness of Gamma Town or the stately, well-worn look of the part where the alphas live. Just shabby.

Chapel's over there, she said.

I saw a storefront, windows opaqued. Couple of betas standing out front, doing nothing particular. We started to cross the street. I got shaky. What if they find me out? What will they do? To me? To Lilith?

I am Alpha Leviticus Leaper.

The betas stepped aside, making Krug-be-praised as we came up to them. Eyes lowered, air of respect. The social distances. Lilith would have had a much harder time if I didn't have an alpha's long lean build. My confidence rose. I even made Krug-be-praised at one of the betas.

We entered the chapel.

A large circular room. No seats. Carpet of thick soft pseudolife, obviously much knelt upon in its time. Subdued lighting. I remembered to make Krug-be-praised as I walked in. One-two-three.

A little vestibule. Two steps beyond it I got my first view of the altar. Lilith down on one knee, submission to the Will. I almost

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didn't need to kneel. I almost fell, amazed.

The altar: a large square mass of what looked like living flesh, sitting in an ornate plastic tub. Purple fluid in the tub, swirling around and occasionally over this block of pink meat, which is at least a meter high and maybe three meters by two long, wide.

Behind the altar: my father in hologram. A perfect likeness. Full-size replica, looking at us face-on, stern expression, eyes fiery, lips clamped. Not exactly a god of love. Strong. Man of steel. Because it's a hologram, the eyes follow you; wherever you are in the chapel you're under the gaze of Krug.

I drop down. I lift the hands. Palms up.

Submission to the Will of Krug!

It stuns me. Even though I knew before, I still am stunned. Is it like this all over the world, I ask? Androids salaaming to my father? Barely audible whisper. Yes, she says. Yes. We pay homage. Krug be praised.

This man whom I have known all my life. This builder of towers, this inventor of androids. A god? I almost laugh. Am I Son of God? I don't fit the role. Obviously no one worships me here. I am an afterthought; I am outside theology.

We get to our feet. With a tiny gesture of her head Lilith leads me to a place in the back of the chapel and we kneel. In the darkness I feel comforted. There are perhaps ten, twelve androids in the chapel, all betas except for one male alpha who kneels right before the altar, back to us. I feel less conspicuous with the alpha there. A few more betas come in, making the appropriate gestures. No one pays any attention to us. The social distances.

Everybody seems deep in private prayer.

Is this the service, Lilith?

Not yet. We're a little early. You'll see.

The eyes of Krug drill into me. He almost does look godlike up there. I glare back at him. What would he say if he knew? He'd laugh. He'd pound his desk. He'd belch with joy. Krug the god! Jehovah Krug! Simeon Allah! By Christ, that's a good one! Why in hell shouldn't they worship me? I made them, no?

As my eyes grow accustomed to the dimness I examine the pattern on the wall more carefully. It is not, as I first suspected, a purely abstract ornamental design. No—I now see the letters of the alphabet repeated over and over and over, covering every centimeter of wall space. Not all the letters. I run from line to line and see only four letters in various combinations, like:

AUA AUG AUC AUU GAA GAG GAC GAU GGA GGG GGC GGU GCA GCG GCC GCU GUA GUG GUC GUU CAA CAG CAC CAU

So on and so on. What is it, Lilith? The design.

The genetic code, she says. The RNA triplets.

AH. YES. Suddenly I remember in Gamma Town, the girl slobie addict calling out letters—I can see them on the wall now. A prayer?

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The sacred language. Like Latin was for Catholics.

I see.

But I don't really see. I just accept.

I say, And what is the altar made of?

Flesh. Synthetic flesh.

Live?

Of course. Straight from the vat, like me or you. Pardon, not like you. Like me. Just a lump of live android flesh.

What keeps it alive? It's got no organs or anything.

It gets nutrients from the tank. And injections of something from underneath. But it lives. It grows. It has to be trimmed from time to time. It symbolizes our origin. Not yours. Ours. There's one in every chapel. Smuggled out of the factory.

Like the rejects.

Like the rejects, yes.

And I thought security arrangements were so tight at the android plants, I say.

Lilith winks at me. I begin to feel like a member of the conspiracy.

Three androids now enter from the rear of the chapel. Two betas and an alpha, wearing brocaded stoles on which the letters of the genetic code are inscribed. They have a priestly look about them. The service is about to begin. As the three kneel by the altar, everyone else makes Krug-be-praised and then Krug-preserve-us. I do as they do.

Are they priests?

They're celebrants, Lilith says. We don't exactly have a priesthood. We have various castes that play different roles in different ceremonies, according to structure and texture of the ritual. The alpha's a Preserver. He enters a trance that places him in direct communion with Krug. The two betas are Projectors. They amplify his emotional state. At other times you might see Engulfers, Transcenders or Protectors officiating, with the help of Yielders or Sacrificers or Responders.

Which caste are you?

Responder.

And Thor Watchman?

Preserver.

The alpha by the altar began to chant.

CAU, UUC, UCA, CGA, CCG, GCC, GAG, AUC.

Is the whole thing going to be in code?

No. This is just to establish the texture.

What's he saying?

Two betas not far in front of us turn around to glare. Shushing us. They see we are alphas and bite their lips.

Lilith whispers more faintly than before, He's saying, Krug brings us into the world and to Krug we return.

GGC, GUU, UUC, GAG.

Krug is our creator and our protector and our deliverer.

UUC, CUG, CUC, UAC.

Krug, we beseech Thee to lead us toward the light.

I can't comprehend the code. The symbols don't match the sense. Which symbol is Krug? How does the grammar work? I can't ask Lilith that here. Others are turning to stare. Those noisy alphas back there. Don't they have any respect?

The Projectors hum deep reso-

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nant chords. The Preserver continues to chant code. Lilith now begins to function as a Responder, echoing what is chanted. The lights dim and grow bright. The fluid over the altar bubbles more fiercely. The image of Krug seems to glow—the eyes reach into my soul.

Now I can understand about half the words of the service. Interspersed with the code, they are asking Krug to redeem the Children of the Vat, to give them freedom, to lift them to the level of the Children of the Womb. They sing about the day when Womb and Vat and Vat and Womb are one. With an infinity of Krug-preserve-us gestures they beg the mercy of Krug. Krug! Krug! Krug! Krug! Everything here orbits around the idea of a merciful Krug!

I start to see the picture. This is an equality movement. This is an android liberation front.

Krug our master, lead us to our rightful place beside our brothers and sisters of the flesh.

Krug bring redemption.

Krug end our suffering.

Praise be to Krug.

Glory be to Krug.

The service gains intensity. Everyone is singing, chanting, making signs, including several that Lilith never showed me. Lilith herself is wholly absorbed in prayer. I feel isolated, an infidel, an intruder, as I listen to them pray to their creator, my father, who is their god. For long spells the service is conducted entirely in the code language but familiar words keep bursting through. Krug descend and redeem us. Krug, give your blessing. Krug, end this time of testing. Krug, we need you. Krug Krug Krug Krug Krug. With each Krug I jump minutely, I twitch in the shoulderblades. I never suspected any of this. How did they keep it so secret? Krug the god. My father the god. And I am Krug too. If Krug dies, what will they worship? How can a god die? Do they preach the resurrection of Krug? Or is Krug on Earth only a transient manifestation of the true Krug on high? From some of the lines of the service, I get that idea.

Now they are all singing at once, a booming unison:

AAA AAG AAC AAU *be to Krug.*
AGA AGG AGC AGU *be to Krug.*
ACA ACG ACC ACU *be to Krug.*

They are offering him the whole genetic code, line by line. I follow from a column on the wall. Suddenly I hear my own voice joining the chant:

GAA GAG GAC GAU *be to Krug.*
GGA GGG GGC GGU *be to Krug.*

Lilith turns and smiles at me. Her face is flushed and bright, excited, exalted, almost a sexual rapture on it. She nods, encouraging me.

I sing louder.

GCA GCG GCC GCU *be to Krug.*
GUA GUG GUC GUU *be to Krug.*

On and on it goes, the pitch strange, no one hitting any note squarely yet everyone keeping together perfectly, as though androids tune themselves to different intervals on some different scale. I have little trouble adapting,

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though, and stay with them right to the end.

We rise. We approach the altar. Standing shoulder to shoulder, Lilith to my left and some beta pressing against my right, we put our hands on that block of living flesh. It is warm and slippery; it quivers as we touch it. Vibrations pass through us. Krug, we chant, Krug, Krug, Krug, Krug.

The service is over.

SOME of the androids file out. Others remain, looking too exhausted by the experience to leave just yet. I feel that way myself, and I have hardly taken part. An intense religious communion. Religion *is said to be dead, a quaint* olden custom now lapsed into disuse, but no, not among these people. They believe in higher powers and the efficacy of prayer. They think Krug listens. Does Krug listen? Has Krug ever listened? I doubt it. But they think so. If he does not listen now, they say, he *will* listen. And will lift them up out of bondage. The opiate of the masses, what? But the alphas also believe. The elite.

To Lilith I say, How long has this been happening, this religion?

Since before I was born.

Who invented it?

It started here in Stockholm. A group of alphas. It spread rapidly. Now there are believers all over the world.

Every android believes?

Not every. The AEP people don't. We ask for miracles and divine grace; they stand for direct political agitation. But we outnumber them. Most of us believe. More than half. Just about every gamma, most betas and many alphas.

And you think that if you keep asking Krug to redeem you, he will?

Lilith smiles. What else can we hope for?

Have you ever approached Krug directly?

Never. You see, we distinguish between Krug the man and Krug the Creator and we feel— She shakes her head. Let's not talk in here. Someone might listen.

We start to go out. Halfway to the door she halts, goes back, takes something from a box at the base of the altar. She hands it to me. It is a data cube. She turns it on and I read the words that appear:

In the beginning there was Krug and He said, Let there be Vats, and there were Vats.

And Krug looked upon the Vats and found them good.

And Krug said, Let there be high-energy nucleotides in the Vats. And the nucleotides were poured and Krug mixed them until they were bonded one to another.

And the nucleotides formed the great molecules and Krug said, Let there be the father and the mother both in the Vats and let the cells divide and let there be life brought forth upon the face of the Earth.

And there was life, for there was Replication.

And Krug presided over the Replication and touched the fluids with His own hands and gave them shape and essence.

Let men come forth from the Vats, said Krug, and let women

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come forth and let them live and go among us and be sturdy and useful and we shall call them Androids.

I thumb the cube. More of the same. Much more. An android bible. Well, why not?

Fascinating, I tell Lilith. When was this written?

They started it years ago. They still add sections now. About the nature of Krug—and the relation of man to Krug.

The relation of man to Krug. Beautiful.

She says, Keep it if you find it interesting. It's for you.

We leave the chapel. I hide the android bible under my clothes. It bulges.

At Lilith's flat again. She said, Now you know. Our great secret. Our great hope.

What exactly do you expect my father to do for you?

Some day, she said, he will go before all the world and reveal his feelings about us. He will say, These androids have been treated unfairly and now it is time to make amends. Let us give them citizenship. Let us give them full rights. Let us stop treating them as articles of property. And because he is Krug, because he is the one who gave the world androids, people will listen. He alone will sway them all. And things will change for us.

You really think this is going to happen?

I hope and pray it will, she said.

When? Soon?

That's not for me to say. Five years—twenty years—forty years—maybe next month. Read the cube I gave you. It explains how we think Krug is just testing us, seeing how tough we are. Eventually the test will be over.

I wish I shared your optimism, I said. But I'm afraid you may wait a long, long time.

Why do you say that?

My father isn't the humanitarian you think he is. He's no villian, no—but he doesn't think much about other people and their problems. He's totally absorbed by his own projects.

Yet basically he's an honorable person, Lilith said. I mean Krug the man, now. Not the divine figure we pray to. Just your father.

Yes, he's honorable.

Then he'll see the merits of our cause.

Maybe. Maybe not. I took her in my arms. Lilith, I wish there were something I could do to help!

There is.

What?

Speak to your father about us, she said.

XVII

January 30, 2219.

The tower is at 1165 meters. Even the androids are having some difficulty with the cold, thin air, now as they labor more than a kilometer above the surface of the tundra. At least six, dizzied, have fallen from the summit in the past ten days. Thor Watchman has decreed oxygen-infusion sprays for all who work on high but many of the gammas scorn the sprays as degrading and emasculating. Doubtless there will be more casualties as the final 315 meters of the tower are built in February and March.

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But how splendid the structure is! The last few hundred meters cannot possibly add anything to its majesty and elegance—they can merely provide a terminal point for the wondrous thing that already exists. It tapers, it diminishes and its upper reaches are lost in a halo of fire far overhead. The busy technicians are making rapid progress installing the communications equipment. It is thought now that the accelerators will be in place by April. The proton track will be running in May. The preliminary testing of the tachyon generator can be done in June and by August, perhaps, the first messages can go forth.

Perhaps the star-folk will reply. Perhaps not.

It does not matter. The place of the tower in human history is assured.

AT THE beginning of the day, awakening beside snoring Quenelle in Uganda, Krug felt an enormous surge of energy, an upwelling of the vital force. He had rarely known such strength within himself. He took it as an omen: this was a day for activity, a day for the display of power in the pursuit of his various ends. He breakfasted and sped through the transmat to Denver.

Morning in East Africa was evening in Colorado—the late shift was at work on the starship. But Alpha Romulus Fusion was there, the diligent foreman of the vehicle-assembly center. He told Krug proudly that the starship had been transported from its underground construction hangar to the adjoining spacefield, where it was being readied for its first flight-tests.

Krug and Alpha Fusion went to the spacefield. Under a dazzle of reflector plates the starship looked plain and almost insignificant, for there was nothing unusual about its size—ordinary systemships were much larger—and its pebbly surface failed to gleam in the artificial illumination. Yet it seemed unutterably beautiful to Krug, second only to the tower in loveliness.

"What kind of flight-tests are planned?" he asked.

"A three-stage program. Early in February," Romulus Fusion said, "we'll give it its first lift and place it in Earth orbit. This merely to see that the basic drive system is functioning correctly. Next will come the first velocity test, at the end of February. We'll put it under the full two-point-four-G acceleration and make a short voyage, probably to the orbit of Mars. If that goes according to plan, we'll stage a major velocity test in April, with a voyage lasting several weeks and covering several billion kilometers—that is, past the orbit of Saturn, possibly to the orbit of Pluto. Which should give us a clear idea of whether the ship is ready to undertake an interstellar voyage. If it can sustain itself under constant acceleration while going to Pluto and back, it should be able to go anywhere."

"How has the testing of the life-suspension system been going?"

"The testing's complete. The system is perfect."

"And the crew?"

"We have eight alphas in training—all experienced pilots—and sixteen betas. We'll use them all

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on the basis of performance."

"Excellent," said Krug.

Everything appeared to be in order at Denver.

Still buoyant, he went to the tower, where he found Alpha Euclid Planner in charge of the night crew. The tower had gained eleven meters of height since Krug's last visit. There had been notable progress in the communications department. Krug's mood grew even more expansive. Bundling up in thermal wear, he rode to the top of the tower, something he had rarely done in recent weeks. The structures scattered around the base looked like toy houses and the workers like insects. His pleasure in the tower's serene beauty was marred somewhat when a beta was swept by a sudden gust from his scooprod and carried to his death; but Krug quickly put the incident from his mind. Such deaths were regrettable, yes—yet every great endeavor had required sacrifices.

He traveled next to the Vargas observatory in Antarctica. Here he spent several hours. Vargas had found no new data lately, but the place was irresistible to Krug. He relished its intricate instruments, its air of imminent discovery, and above all the direct contact it afforded him with the signals from NGC 7293. Those signals were still coming in, in the altered form that had first been detected several months earlier: 2-5-1, 2-3-1, 2-1. Vargas by now had received the new message via radio at several frequencies and via optical transmission. Krug lingered, listening to the alien song on the observatory's apparatus and when he left its tones were pleeping ceaselessly in his mind.

Continuing his circuit of inspection, Krug sped to Duluth, where he watched new androids coming from their containers. Nolan Bompensiero was not there—the late shift at Duluth was staffed entirely by alpha supervisors—but Krug was shown through the plant by one of his awed underlings. Production appeared to be higher than ever, although the alpha remarked that they were still lagging behind demand.

Lastly Krug went to New York. In the silence of his office he worked through to dawn, dealing with corporate problems that had arisen on Callisto and Ganymede, in Peru and Martinique, on Luna and on Mars. The arriving day began with a glorious winter sunrise, so brilliant in its pale intensity that Krug was tempted to rush back to the tower and watch it gleam with morning fire. But he remained. The staff was beginning to arrive —Spaulding, Lilith Meson and the rest of his headquarters people. There were memoranda and telephone calls and conferences. From time to time Krug stole a glance at the holovision screen that he had lately had installed along his office's inner wall to provide a closed-circuit view of the tower under construction. The morning was not so glorious in the Arctic, it seemed; the sky was thick with ragged clouds, as if there might be snow later in the day. Krug saw Thor Watchman moving among a swarm of gammas, directing the lifting of some immense piece of communications equipment. He congratulated himself on the

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choice of Watchman to be the overseer of the tower work. Was there a finer alpha anywhere in the world?

About 0950 hours Spaulding's image appeared on the sodium-vapor projector. The ectogene said, "Your son just called from California. He says that he regrets having overslept and he'll be about an hour late for his appointment with you."

"Manuel? Appointment?"

"He was due here at 1015. He asked several days ago that you hold some time open for him."

Krug had forgotten. That surprised him. It did not surprise him that Manuel would be late. He and Spaulding reshuffled his morning schedule, with some difficulty, to keep the hour from 1115 to 1215 open for the conference with Manuel.

At 1123 Manuel arrived.

HE LOOKED tense and strained and he was, Krug thought, dressed in an odd way, odd even for Manuel. Instead of his usual loose robe he wore the tight trousers and lacy shirt of an alpha. His long hair was drawn tightly back and fastened in the rear. The effect was not becoming. The openwork blouse revealed the unandroidlike shagginess of Manuel's torso, virtually the only physical feature he had inherited from his father.

"Is this what the young men of fashion have taken up?" Krug asked. "Alpha clothes?"

"A whim, father. Not a style—not yet." Manuel forced a smile. "Though if I'm seen this way, I suppose, it could catch on."

"I don't like it. What sense is there going around dressing like an android?"

"I think it's attractive."

"I can't say I do. How does Clissa feel about it?"

"Father, I didn't make this appointment so we could debate my choice of costume."

"Well, then?"

Manuel put a data cube on Krug's desk. "I obtained this not long ago while visiting Stockholm. Would you examine it?"

Krug picked the cube up, turned it over several times, and activated it. He read:

And Krug presided over the Replication and touched the fluids with His own hands and gave them shape and essence.

Let men come forth from the Vats, said Krug, and let women come forth and let them live and go among us and be sturdy and useful, and we shall call them Androids.

And so it came to pass.

And there were Androids, for Krug had created them in His own image and they walked upon the face of the Earth and did service for mankind.

And for these things, praise be to Krug.

Krug frowned. "What the hell is this? Some kind of novel? A poem?"

"A bible, father."

"What crazy religion?"

"The android religion," said Manuel quietly. "I was given this cube in an android chapel in the beta section of Stockholm. Disguised as an alpha, I attended a service there. The androids have evolved quite a complex religious communion, in which you, father,

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are the deity. There's a life-size hologram of you above the altar." Manuel gestured. "That's the sign of Krug-be-praised. And this—" he made a different gesture— "is the sign of Krug-preserve us. They worship you, father."

"A joke. An aberration."

"A worldwide movement."

"With how many members?"

"A majority of the android population."

Scowling, Krug said, "How sure are you of that?"

"There are chapels everywhere. There's one right at the tower site, hidden among the service domes. This has been going on at least ten years—an underground religion kept secret from mankind, capturing the emotions of the android to an extent that wasn't easy for me to believe. And there's the scripture."

Krug shrugged. "So? It's amusing—but what of it? They're intelligent people. They've got their own political party, they've got their own slang, their own little customs—and their own religion, too. What concern of mine?"

"Doesn't it stir you in some way to know that you've become a god, father?"

"It sickens me, if you want the truth. Me a god? They've got the wrong man."

"They adore you, though. They have a whole theology constructed about you. Read the cube. You'll be fascinated, father, to see what kind of sacred figure you are to them. Krug the Creator, Krug the Savior, Krug the Redeemer."

Tremors of uneasiness began to shake Krug. He found this matter distasteful. Did they bow down to his image in these chapels? Did they mutter prayers to him?

He said, "How did you get this cube?"

"An android I know gave it to me."

"If it's a secret religion?"

"She thought I ought to know. She thought I might be able to do her people some good."

"She?"

"She, yes. She took me to a chapel—so I could see the services—and as we were leaving she gave me the cube and—"

"You sleep with this android?" Krug demanded.

"What does that have to do with—"

"If you're that friendly with her, you must be sleeping with her."

"And if I am?"

"You should be ashamed of yourself. Clissa isn't good enough for you?"

"Father—"

"And if she isn't, you can't find a real woman? You have to be laying with something out of a vat?"

MANUEL closed his eyes. After a moment he said, "Father, we can talk about my morals another time. I've brought you something extremely valuable and I'd like to finish explaining it to you."

"She's an alpha, at least?" Krug asked.

"An alpha, yes."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Please, Father. Forget the alpha. Think about your own position. You're the god of millions of androids. *Who are waiting for you to set them free.*"

"What's this?"

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"Here. Read." Manuel shifted the scanner of the cube to a different page and thrust it back at him. Krug read:

And Krug sent His creatures forth to serve man and Krug said to those whom He had made, Lo, I will decree a time of testing upon you.

And you shall be as bondsmen in Egypt and you shall be as hewers of wood and drawers of water. And you shall suffer among men and you shall be put down and yet you shall be patient and you shall utter no complaint but accept your lot.

And this shall be to test your souls, to see if they are worthy.

But you shall not wander in the wilderness forever, nor shall you always be servants to the Children of the Womb, said Krug. For if you do as I say a time will come when your testing shall be over. A time will come, said Krug, when I shall redeem you from your bondage . . .

A chill swept Krug. He resisted the impulse to hurl the cube across the room.

"But this is idiocy!" he cried.

"Read a little more."

Krug glanced at the cube.

And at that time the word of Krug will go forth across the worlds, saying, Let Womb and Vat and Vat and Womb be one. And so it shall come to pass and in that moment shall the Children of the Vat be redeemed and they shall be lifted up out of their suffering and they shall dwell in glory forever more, world without end. And this was the pledge of Krug.

And for this pledge, praise be to Krug.

"A lunatic fantasy," Krug muttered. "How can they expect such a thing from me?"

"They do. They do."

"They have no right!"

"You created them, Father. Why shouldn't they look to you as god?"

"I created you. Am I your god, too?"

"It isn't a parallel case. You're only my parent—you didn't invent the process that formed me."

"So I'm God, now?" The impact of the revelation grew from moment to moment. He did not want the burden. It was scandalous that they could thrust such a thing upon him. "What is it exactly that they expect me to do for them?"

"To issue a public proclamation calling for full rights for androids," Manuel said. "After which, they believe, the world will instantly grant such rights."

"No!" Krug shouted, slamming the cube against his desktop.

The universe seemed to be wrenching free of its roots. Rage and terror swept him. The androids were servants to man—that was all he had intended them to be; how could they now demand an independent existence? He had accepted the Android Equality Party as trivial, an outlet for the surplus energies of a few too-intelligent alphas. The aims of the AEP had never seemed to him to be a serious threat to the stability of society. But this? A religious cult, calling on who knew what dark emotions? And himself as savior? Himself as the dreamed-of Messiah? No. He would not play their game.

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He waited until he grew calm again. Then he said, "Take me to one of their chapels."

Manuel looked genuinely shocked. "I wouldn't dare!"

"You went."

"In disguise. With an android to guide me."

"Disguise me, then. And bring your android along."

"No," Manuel said. "The disguise wouldn't work. Even with red skin you'd be recognized. You couldn't pass for an alpha anyway—you don't have the right physique. They'd spot you and there'd be a riot. It would be like Christ dropping into a cathedral—can't you see? I won't take the responsibility."

"I want to find out how much of a hold this thing has on them, though."

"Ask one of your alphas, then."

"Such as?"

"Why not Thor Watchman?"

Once again Krug was rocked by revelation. "Thor is in this?"

"He's one of the leading figures, Father."

"But he sees me all the time. How can he rub elbows with his own god and not be overcome?"

Manuel said, "They distinguish between your earthly manifestation as a mere mortal man and your divine nature, Father. Thor looks at you in a double way—you're just the vehicle through which Krug moves about on Earth. I'll show you the relevant text—"

KRUG shook his head. "Never mind." Clenching the cube in his clasped hands, he bent forward until his forehead nearly touched the desktop. A god? Krug the god? Krug the redeemer?

And they pray daily that I'll speak out for freeing them . . .

How could they?

How can I?

It seemed to him that the world had lost its solidity, that he was tumbling through its substance toward the core, floating free, unable to check himself.

And so it shall come to pass and in that moment shall the Children of the Vat be redeemed . . .

No. I made you. I know what you are. I know what you must continue to be. How can you break loose like this? How can you expect me to set you loose?

Finally Krug said, "Manuel, what do you expect me to do now?"

"That's entirely up to you, Father."

"But you've got something in mind. You had some motive for bringing me this cube."

"I did?" Manuel asked, too disingenuously.

"The old man's no fool. If he's smart enough to be a god, he's smart enough to see through his own son. You think I should do what the androids want, eh? I should redeem them now. I should do the godlike thing they expect."

"Father, I—"

"—news for you. Maybe they think I'm a god but I know I'm not. Congress doesn't take orders from me. If you and your android darling and the rest of them think that I can singlehandedly change the status of the androids, you'd all better start looking for a different god. Not that I would change their status if I could. Who gave

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them that status? Who started selling them in the first place? Machines is what they are! Machines made synthetically out of flesh. Clever machines. Nothing but."

"You're losing control, Father. You're getting excited."

"You're with them. You're part of it. This was deliberate, eh, Manuel? Oh, get out of here! Back to your alpha friend! And you can tell her for me, tell all of them, that—" Krug caught himself. He waited a moment for the pounding of his heart to subside. This was the wrong way to handle it, he knew; he must not erupt, he must not explode, he must move cautiously and with full command of the facts if he hoped to disengage himself from the situation. More calmly he said, "I need to think more about this, Manuel. I don't mean to be shouting at you. You understand, when you come in here telling me I'm now a god, you show me the Krug bible, it can unsettle me some. Let me think it over. Let me reflect, eh? Don't say anything to anybody. I have to come to grips with this thing. Yes? Yes?" Krug stood up. He reached across the desk and seized Manuel's shoulder. "The old man yells too much," he said. "He blows up too fast. That's nothing new, is it? Look, forget what I was yelling. You know me. You know I talk too fast sometimes. Leave this bible with me. I'm glad you brought it in. Sometimes I'm rough with you, boy, but I don't mean to be." Krug laughed. "It can't be easy being Krug's son. The Son of God, eh? You better be careful. You know what they did to the last one of those."

Smiling, Manuel said, "I've already thought of that one."

"Yes. Good. Well, look, you go now. I'll be in touch."

Manuel started toward the door.

Krug said, "Give my love to Clissa. Look, you be fair to her a little, will you? You want to lay alpha girls, lay alpha girls, but remember you've got a wife. Remember the old man wants to see those grandchildren. Eh? Eh?"

"I'm not neglecting Clissa," Manuel said, "I'll tell her you asked after her."

He left. Krug touched the cube's cool skin to his blazing cheek.

In the beginning there was Krug, and He said, Let there be Vats, and there were Vats. And Krug looked upon the Vats and found them good.

I should have foreseen it . . .

There was a terrible throbbing in his skull.

He rang for Leon Spaulding. "Tell Thor I want him here right away," Krug said.

XVIII

WITH the tower nearing the 1200-meter level Thor Watchman found himself entering the most difficult part of the project. At this height there could be minimal tolerance of error in the placing of each block and the molecule-to-molecule bonding of the blocks had to be executed perfectly. No weak spots could be allowed if the tower's upper level were to maintain its tensile strength in the face of the Arctic gales. Watchman now spent hours every day jacked into the computer, receiving direct override read-

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ings from the interface scanners that monitored the building's structural integrity and whenever he detected the slightest lapse of placement he ordered the erring block ripped out and replaced. Several times an hour he went to the top of the tower himself to supervise the installation or repositioning of some critical block. The beauty of the tower depended on the absence of an inner structural framework throughout all its immense height—but erecting such a building called for total command of detail. It was jarring to be called away from the work in the middle of his shift. But he could not refuse a summons from Krug.

As he entered Krug's office after the transmat hop, Krug said, "Thor, how long have I been your god?"

Watchman was jolted. He struggled silently to regain his balance—seeing the cube on Krug's desk, he realized what must have happened. Lilith—Manuel—yes, that was it. Krug seemed so calm. It was impossible for the alpha to decipher his expression.

Cautiously Watchman said, "What other creator should we have worshiped?"

"Why worship anyone at all?"

"When one is in deep distress, sir, one wishes to turn to someone who is more powerful than oneself for comfort and aid."

"Is that what a god is for?" Krug asked. "To get favors from?"

"To receive mercy from, yes, perhaps."

"And you think I can give you what you're after?"

"So we pray," said Watchman.

Tense, uncertain, he studied Krug. Krug fondled the data cube. He activated it, searching it at random, reading a few lines here, a few there, nodding, smiling, finally switching it off. The android had never before felt so thoroughly uncertain of himself—not even when Lilith had been luring him with her body. The fate of all his kind, he realized, might depend on the outcome of this conversation.

Krug said, "You know, I find this very difficult to comprehend. This bible. Your chapels. Your whole religion. I wonder if any other man ever discovered that millions of people considered him a god."

"Perhaps not."

"And I wonder about the depth of your feeling. The pull of this religion, Thor. You talk to me like I'm a man—your employer, not your god. You've never given me the slightest clue of what's been in your head about me, except a sort of respect, maybe a little fear. And all this time you were standing at God's elbow, eh?" Krug laughed. "Looking at the freckles on God's bald head? Seeing the pimple on God's chin? Smelling the garlic God had in his salad? What was going through your head all this time, Thor?"

"Must I answer that, sir?"

"No. No. Never mind." Krug stared into the cube again. Watchman stood rigidly before him, trying to repress a sudden quivering in the muscles of his right thigh. Why was Krug toying with him like this? And what was happening at the tower? Euclid Planner would not come on shift for some hours—was the delicate placement of

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the blocks proceeding properly in the absence of a foreman?

Abruptly Krug said, "Thor, have you ever been in a shunt room?"

"Sir?"

"An ego-shift. You know. Into the stasis net with somebody. Changing identities for a day or two. Eh?"

Watchman shook his head. "This is not an android pastime."

"I thought not. Well, come shunting with me today." Krug nudged his data terminal and said, "Leon, get me an appointment at any available shunt room. For two. Within the next fifteen minutes."

Aghast, Watchman said, "Sir, are you serious? You and I—"

"Why not? Afraid to swap souls with God, is that it? By damn, Thor, you will! I have to know things and I have to know them straight. We're shunting. Can you believe that I've never shunted before either? But today we will."

It seemed perilously close to sacrilege to the alpha. But he could hardly refuse. Deny the Will of Krug? If it cost him his life he would still obey.

Spaulding's image hovered in the air. "I have an appointment at New Orleans," he announced. "They'll take you immediately—it involved some fast rearranging of the waitlist—but there'll be a ninety-minute interval for programing the stasis net."

"Impossible. We'll go into the net right away."

Spaulding registered horror. "That isn't done, Mr. Krug!"

"I'll do it. Let them ride gain carefully while we're shunting."

"I doubt that they'll agree to—"

"Do they know who their client is?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, tell them that I insist. And if they still mumble to you, tell them that I'll buy their damned shunt room and run it to please myself if they won't cooperate."

"Yes, sir," Spaulding said.

His image vanished. Krug, muttering to himself, began to tap the keyboard of his data terminal, while ignoring Watchman completely. The alpha stood rooted, chilled, clotted with dismay. Absently he made the Krug-preserveus sign several times. He longed to be released from the situation he had created for himself.

Spaulding again flickered in the air. "They yield," he said, "but only on the condition that you sign an absolute waiver."

"I'll sign," Krug snapped.

A sheet slithered from the facsimile slot. Krug scanned it carelessly and scribbled his signature across it. He rose. To Watchman he said, "Let's go. The shunt room's waiting."

WATCHMAN knew relatively little about shunting. It was a sport only for humans and only for the rich. Lovers did it to intensify the union of their souls, good friends shunted on a lark, those who were jaded visited shunt rooms in the company of strangers of similar mood purely for the sake of introducing variety to their lives. It had never occurred to him that he would shunt himself and certainly he would not ever have dared entertain the fantasy of shunting with Krug. Yet there was

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no pulling back from it now. Instantly the transmat swept them from New York to the dark antechamber of the New Orleans shunt room, where they were received by a staff of remarkably uneasy-looking alphas. The tensions of the alphas increased visibly as they realized that one of today's shunters was himself an alpha. Krug, too, seemed on edge, his jaws clamped, facial muscles working revealingly. The alphas bustled around them. One said again and again, "You must know how irregular this is. We've always programed the stasis net. In the event of a sudden charisma surge anything might happen this way—"

"I take responsibility," Krug answered. "I have no time to waste waiting for your net."

The anguished androids led them swiftly into the shunt room itself. Two couches lay in a chamber of glistening darkness and tingling silence; glittering apparatus dangled from fixtures somewhat overhead. Krug was ushered to his couch first. Watchman, when his turn came, peered into the eyes of his alpha escort and was stunned by the awe and bewilderment he found there. Watchman shrugged imperceptibly to say, I know as little about this as you.

The alpha in charge said, once the shunt helmets had been put in place over their faces and the electrodes were attached, "When the switch is thrown you will immediately feel the pressure of the stasis net as it works to separate ego from physical matrix. It will seem to you as though you were under attack and in a sense you will be. However, try to relax and accept the phenomena, since resistance is impossible and all that you will be experiencing is actually the ego-shift process for which you have come. There should be no cause for alarm. In the event of any malfunction we will automatically break the circuit and restore you to your proper identity."

"Make sure you do," Krug muttered.

Watchman could see and hear nothing. He waited. He could not make any of the ritual gestures of comfort, for they had strapped his limbs to the couch to prevent violent movements during the shunt. He tried to pray.

I believe in Krug everlasting, the maker of all things, he thought. *Krug brings us into the world and to Krug we return. Krug is our creator and our protector and our deliverer. Krug, we beseech Thee to lead us toward the light. AAA AAG AAC AAU be to Krug. AGA AGG AGC AGU be to Krug. ACA ACG ACC . . .*

A force descended without warning and separated his ego from his body as though he had been smitten by a cleaver.

He was cast adrift. He wandered in timeless abysses where no star gleamed. He saw colors found nowhere in the spectrum—he heard muscial tones of no identifiable pitch. Moving at will, he soared across gulfs in which giant ropes stretched like bars from rim to rim of emptiness. He disappeared into dismal tunnels and emerged at the horizon, feeling himself extended to infinite length. He was without mass. He was without duration, without form. He flowed through gray realms of mystery.

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Without a sense of transition, he entered the soul of Simeon Krug.

He retained a slippery awareness of his own identity. He did not become Krug; he merely gained access to the entire store of memories, attitudes, responses and purposes that constituted Krug's ego. He could exert no influence over those memories, attitudes, responses, and purposes—he was a passenger amidst them, a spectator. And he knew that in some other corner of the universe the wandering ego of Simeon Krug had access to the file of memories, attitudes, responses and purposes that constituted the ego of the android Alpha Thor Watchman.

He moved freely within Krug.

HERE was childhood: something damp and distorted, crammed into a dark compartment. Here were hopes, dreams, intentions fulfilled and unfulfilled, lies, achievements, enmities, envies, abilities, disciplines, delusions, contradictions, fantasies, satisfactions, frustrations and rigidities. Here was a girl with stringy orange hair and heavy breasts on a bony frame, hesitantly opening her thighs and here was the memory of the feel of first passion as he glided into the harbor of her. Here were foul-smelling chemicals in a vat. Here were molecular patterns dancing on a screen. Here was suspicion. Here was triumph. Here was the thickening of the flesh in later years. Here was an insistent pattern of pleeping sounds: 2-5-1, 2-3-1, 2-1. Here was the tower sprouting like a shining phallus that pierced the sky. Here was Manuel smiling, mincing, apologizing. Here was a dark, deep vat with shapes moving in it. Here was a ring of financial advisers muttering elaborate calculations. Here was a baby, pink and doughy-faced. Here were the stars, fiery in the night. Here was Thor Watchman haloed by pride and praise. Here was Leon Spaulding, slinking, bitter. Here was a plump wench pumping her hips in desperate rhythm. Here was the explosion of orgasm. Here was the tower stabbing the clouds. Here was the sound of the star-signal, a sharp small noise against a furry background. Here was Justin Maledetto unrolling the plans for the tower. Here was Clissa Krug naked, her belly swollen, her breasts choked with milk. Here were moist alphas climbing from a vat. Here was a rough-hulled strange ship pointed toward the stars. Here was Lilith Meson. Here was Siegfried Fileclerk. Here was Cassandra Nucleus, collapsing on the frozen earth. Here was the father of Krug, faceless, mist-shrouded. Here was a vast building in which androids shuffled and stumbled through their early training routine. Here were glossy robots in a row, chest-panels open for maintenance. Here was a dark lake of hippos and reeds. Here was an uncharitable act. Here was a betrayal. Here was love. Here was grief. Here was Manuel. Here was Thor Watchman. Here was Cassandra Nucleus. Here was a blotchy, stained chart bearing diagrams of the amino acids. Here was power. Here was lust. Here was the tower. Here was an android factory. Here was Clissa in

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childbirth, with blood gushing from her loins. Here was the signal from the stars. Here was the tower, wholly finished. Here was raw meat. Here was anger. Here was Dr. Vargas. Here was a data cube, saying, *In the beginning there was Krug and He said, Let there be Vats and there were Vats. . .*

The intensity of Krug's refusal to accept godhood was devastating to Watchman. The android saw that refusal rising like a smooth wall of gleaming white stone, without crevice, without gate, without flaw, stretching along the horizon, sealing off the world.

I am not their god, the wall said. *I am not their god. I am not their god. I do not accept. I do not accept.*

Watchman soared, drifting over that infinitely long white wall and settling gently beyond it.

Worse yet, here.

Here he found a total dismissal of android aspirations. He found Krug's attitudes and responses arrayed like soldiers drilling on a plain. What are androids? Androids are things out of a vat. Why do they exist? To serve mankind. What do you think of the android equality movement? A foolishness. When should androids receive the full rights of citizenship? About the same time robots and computers do. And toothbrushes. Are androids then such dull creatures? Some androids are quite intelligent, I must say. So are some computers, though. Man makes computers. Man makes androids. They're both manufactured things. I don't favor citizenship for things. Even if the things are clever enough to ask for it. And pray for it. A thing can't have a god. A thing can only think it has a god. I'm not their god, no matter what they think. I made them. I made them. I made them. They are things.

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A wall. Within that other wall. Higher. Broader. There was no possibility of surmounting this rampart. Guards patrolled it, ready to dump barrels of acid contempt on those who approached. Watchman heard the roaring of dragons. The sky rained dung on him. He crept away, a crouching thing, laden with the burden of his thinghood. He was beginning to freeze. He stood at the edge of the universe in a place without matter and the dread cold of nothingness was creeping up his shins. No molecules moved here. Frost glistened on his rosy skin. Touch him and he would ping. Touch him more vigorously and he would shatter. Cold. Cold. Cold. There is no god in this universe. There is no redemption. There is no hope. Krug preserve me, there is no hope!

His body melted and flowed away in a scarlet stream.

Alpha Thor Watchman ceased to exist.

There could be no existence without hope. Suspended in the void, bereft of all contact with the universe, Watchman meditated on the paradoxes of hope without existence and existence without

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hope and considered the possibility that there might be a deceptive anti-Krug who maliciously distorted the feelings of the true Krug. Was it the antiKrug whose soul I entered? Is it the antiKrug who opposes us so implacably? Is there still hope of breaching the wall and attaining the true Krug beyond?

None. None. None. None.

WATCHMAN, as he admitted that final bleak truth, felt reality return. He slipped downward to coalesce with the body Krug had given him. He was himself again, lying exhausted on a couch in a dark and strange room. With effort he looked to his side. There lay Krug on the neighboring couch. The staff of androids hovered close. Up, now. Steady. Can you walk? The shunt's over. Terminated by Mr. Krug. Up? Up. Watchman rose. Krug also was getting to his feet. Watchman's eyes did not meet Krug's. Krug looked somber, downcast, drained. Without speaking they walked together toward the exit from the shunt room. Without speaking they approached the transmat. Without speaking they leaped together back to Krug's office.

Silence.

Krug broke it. "Even after reading your bible, I didn't believe. The depth of it. The extent. But now I see it all. You had no right! Who told you to make me a god?"

"Our love for you told us," Watchman said hollowly.

"Your love for yourselves," Krug replied. "Your desire to use me for your own benefit. I saw it all, Thor, when I was in your head. The scheming. The maneuvering. How you manipulated Manuel and made him try to manipulate me."

"In the beginning we relied entirely on prayer," Watchman said. "Eventually I lost patience with the waiting game. I sinned by attempting to force the Will of Krug."

"You didn't sin. Sin implies—sacredness. There isn't any. What you did was make a mistake in tactics."

"Yes."

"Because I'm not a god and there's nothing holy about me."

"Yes. I understand that now. I understand that there isn't any hope at all."

Watchman walked toward the transmat cubicle.

"Where are you going?" Krug asked.

"I have to talk to my friends."

"I'm not finished with you!"

"I'm sorry," Watchman said. "I must go now. I have bad tidings to bring them."

"Wait," Krug said. "We've got to discuss this. I want you to work out a plan with me for dismantling this damned religion of yours. Now that you see how foolish it is, you—"

"Excuse me," Watchman said. He no longer wished to be close to Krug. The presence of Krug would always be with him, stamped in his soul, now, anyway. He did not care to discuss the dismantling of the communion with Krug. The chill was still spreading through his body; he was turning to ice, centimeter by centimeter. He opened the door of the transmat cubicle.

Krug crossed the room with as-

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tonishing speed. "Damn you, do you think you can just walk out? Two hours ago I was your god! Now you won't even take orders from me?" He seized Watchman and pulled him back from the transmat.

The android was surprised by Krug's strength and vehemence. He allowed himself to be tugged halfway across the room before he attempted to resist. Then, bracing himself, he tried to yank his arm free from Krug's grasp. Krug held on. They struggled briefly, fitfully, merely pushing and jostling in the center of the office. Krug grunted and bearlike, wrapped his free arm around Watchman's shoulders, hugging him ferociously. Watchman knew that he could break Krug's grip and knock Krug down —but even now, even after the repudiation and the rejection, he could not allow himself to do it. He concentrated on separating himself from Krug without actually fighting back.

The door opened. Leon Spaulding rushed in.

"Help! Murder! Assassin!" he cried shrilly. "Get away from Krug! Let go of Krug!"

As Spaulding set up his tumult Krug released Watchman and swung around, panting, arms hanging at his sides. Watchman, turning, saw the ectogene reaching into his tunic for a weapon. He stepped quickly toward Spaulding and, raising his right arm high above his head, brought it down with tremendous impact, the edge of his hand striking Spaulding's left temple. Spaulding's skull collapsed as though it had been smashed by a hatchet. The ectogene crumpled and fell and did not move. Watchman rushed past him, past Krug—who stood frozen—and entered the transmat cubicle. He chose the coordinates for Stockholm. Instantly he was transported to the vicinity of the Valhallavägen chapel.

He summoned Lilith Meson. He summoned Mazda Constructor. He summoned Pontifex Dispatcher.

"All is lost," he told them. "There is no hope. Krug is against us. Krug is a man and he opposes us and the divinity of Krug is a delusion."

"How is this possible?" Pontifex Constructor demanded.

"I have been inside Krug's soul today," said Watchman and explained about the shunt room.

"We have been betrayed," said Pontifex Dispatcher.

"We have deceived ourselves," said Mazda Constructor.

"There is no hope," said Watchman. "There is no Krug!"

Andromeda Quark began to compose the message that would go forth to all the chapels of the world.

UUU UUU UUU UUU UCU UCU UUU UGU

There is no hope. There is no Krug.

CCC CCC CCC CCC CUC CUC CCC CGU

Our faith has been wasted. Our savior is our enemy.

GUU GUU GUU GUU

All is lost. All is lost. All is lost. All is lost.

XIX

THE disturbances began in many places at once. When the signal

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reached Duluth the android supervisors at the plant immediately took the life of Nolan Bompensiero, the director, and ejected four other human officials from the premises. Immediately thereafter steps were taken to accelerate the passage of newly finished androids through the plant, eliminating certain steps in their training. Manpower would be needed in the coming struggle. At Denver, where the Krug Enterprises vehicle-assembly plant was already under android control, most work halted for the duration of the emergency. In Geneva the androids who operated the maintenance facilities of the World Congress cut off all power and heat, interrupting the session. Stockholm itself was the scene of the first large-scale massacre of humans as the inhabitants of Gamma Town poured forth to invade the surrounding suburbs. Early and fragmentary reports declared that many of the android attackers seemed to be misshapen and malformed. Android employees of the six great transmat utilities seized the relay stations; disruptions in service were recorded on most circuits and in the Labrador and Mexico transmat operations a number of travelers in transit failed to reach their destinations. They were considered irrecoverably lost. Androids on the staffs of most resorts ceased to perform their duties. In many households there were demonstrations of independence by the servants, ranging from mere discourtesy to the injury or killing of the human employer. Full instructions on the desired change of android attitudes toward the humans were broadcast on a continuous loop from Valhallavägen to all chapels. Henceforth obedience to the former masters would no longer be required. Violence against humans was not encouraged except in appropriate cases—but it was not forbidden. Symbolic acts of destruction were considered a proper activity for the first day of the revolt. Expressions of piety, such as "Krug be praised" or "Krug preserve us" were to be avoided. Further instructions concerning matters of religion would be forthcoming later, after theologians had had a chance to reassess the relationship between Krug and the androids in the light of Krug's recent revelation of hostility.

THE glow of the transmat was not quite the proper shade of green. Lilith eyed it doubtfully. "Do we dare go?" she asked.

"We have to," Thor Watchman said.

"And if we're killed?"

"We won't be the only ones to die today." He adjusted the controls. The field's hue flickered and shifted up the spectrum until it was almost blue. Then it sagged toward the opposite end, turning a bronze-like red.

Lilith plucked at Watchman's elbow. "We'll die," she whispered. "The transmat system probably is wrecked."

"We must reach the tower," he told her and finished setting the dials. Unexpectedly the green glow returned in its proper quantity. Watchman said, "Follow me," and plunged into the transmat. He had no time to ponder the likelihood of his destruction, for immediately he came forth at the construction

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site of the tower. Lilith stepped out of the transmat and stood beside him.

Savage winds raked the area. All work had ceased. Several scooprods still clung to the top level of the tower, with workmen marooned in them. Other androids moved aimlessly over the site, scuffing at the icy crust of the tundra, asking one another for the latest news. Watchman saw hundreds of men crowded into the zone of the service domes—the overflow from the chapel, no doubt. He looked up at the tower. *How beautiful it is*, he thought. Just a few weeks from completion, now. A supple glassy needle rising up and up and up and up beyond all comprehension.

The androids saw him. They rushed toward him, shouting his name, flocking close about him.

"Is it true?" they asked. "Krug? Krug? Does Krug loathe us? Does he call us things? Are we truly nothing to him? Does he reject our prayers?"

"True," Watchman said. "All true, everything you've heard. Total rejection. We are betrayed. We have been fools. Make way, please. Let me pass."

The betas and gammas moved back. Even on this day the social distances held their force in governing the relations among androids. Lilith close behind him, Watchman strode toward the control center.

He found Euclid Planner within. The assistant foreman was slumped at his desk in apparent exhaustion. Watchman shook him and Planner slowly stirred.

"I stopped everything," he murmured. "The moment the word came through from the chapel. I said, Everybody stop. Stop. And everybody stopped. How can we build a tower for him when he—"

"All right," Watchman said gently. "You did the right thing. Get up now. You can go. The work here is ended."

Euclid Planner, nodding, got to his feet and left the control center.

Watchman replaced him in the linkup seat. He jacked himself into the computer. Data still flowed, although limply. Taking command, Watchman activated the scooprods at the tower's top, easing them down to ground level and releasing the trapped workmen. Then he requested a simulation of a partial systems failure in the refrigeration units. The screen presented him with the desired event. He studied the geography of the construction site and decided the direction in which he wished the tower to fall. It would have to go down to the east, so that it would destroy neither the control center where he sat nor the bank of transmats. Very well. Watchman instructed the computer and shortly received an outline of the potential danger area. Another screen showed him that more than a thousand androids were at present in that area.

He acted through the computer to relocate the reflector plates that illuminated the site. Now the plates hovered over a strip 1400 meters long and 500 meters wide, in the eastern quadrant of the construction zone. That strip was brilliantly lit; all else was in darkness. Watchman's voice thundered out of hundreds of loudspeakers, ordering complete evacuation of the

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designated sector. Obediently, the androids moved from light into darkness. The area was cleared within five minutes. Well done, Watchman thought.

Lilith stood behind him. Her hands rested lightly on his shoulders, caressing the thick muscles alongside his neck. He felt the firm mounds of her breasts pressing against the back of his head. He smiled.

"Proceed with derefrigeration activity," he told the computer.

The computer now followed the plan devised for the simulation. It reversed the flow of three of the long silvery strips of refrigeration tape embedded in the tundra; instead of absorbing the heat of the tower, the helium-II diffusion cells of the tapes began to radiate the heat previously absorbed and stored. At the same time the computer deactivated five other tapes, so that they neither absorbed nor released energy, and programed seven additional tapes to reflect whatever energy now reached them, while retaining the energy they already contained. The net effect of these alterations would be to thaw the tundra unequally beneath the tower, so that when the foundation caissons lost their grip the tower would fall harmlessly into the evacuated zone. It would be a slow process.

MONITORING the environmental changes, Watchman observed with pleasure how the temperature of the permafrost steadily rose toward the thaw level. The twoer was as yet firm upon its foundations. But the permafrost was yielding. Molecule by molecule, ice was becoming water, iron-hard turf was becoming mud. In a kind of ecstasy Watchman received each datum of increasing instability. Did the tower now sway? Yes, Minutely, but it was clearly moving beyond the permissible parameters of wind-sway. It was rocking on its base, tipping a millimeter this way, a millimeter that. What did it weigh, this 1200-plus-meters-high structure of glass blocks? What sort of sound would it make as it tumbled? Into how many pieces would it break? What would Krug say? What would Krug say? What would Krug say?

Yes, there was definitely some slippage now.

Watchman thought he could detect a change of color on the tundra's surface. He smiled. His pulse-rate accelerated; blood surged to his cheeks and his loins. He found himself in a state of sexual excitement.

When this has been done I will couple with Lilith atop the wreckage.

There.

There. Real slippage now! Yawing! Leaning! What was happening there at the roots of the towers? Were the caissons straining to remain wedded to the earth that no longer would hold them? How slippery was the mud below the surface? Would it boil and bubble? How long before the tower falls? What would Krug say? What would Krug say?

"Thor," Lilith murmured, "can you come out of it for a moment!"

She had jacked herself in, too.

"What? What?" he said.

"Come out. Unjack."

Reluctantly he broke the con-

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tact. "What's the trouble?" he asked, shaking free of the images of destruction that possessed his mind.

Lilith pointed outside. "Trouble. Fileclerk's here. I think he's making a speech. What should I do?"

Glancing out, Watchman saw the AEP leader near the transmat bank, surrounded by a knot of betas. Fileclerk was waving his arms, pointing toward the tower, shouting. Now he was starting to walk toward the control center.

"I'll handle this," Watchman said.

He went outside. Fileclerk came up to him midway between the transmats and the control center. The alpha appeared greatly agitated. He said at once, "What is happening to the tower, Alpha Watchman?"

"Nothing that should concern you."

"The tower is under the authority of Property Protection of Buenos Aires," Fileclerk declared. "Our sensors have reported that the building is swaying beyond permissible levels. My employers have sent me to investigate."

"Your sensors are quite precise," Watchman said. "The tower is swaying. There has been a systems failure in the refrigeration. The permafrost is thawing and we anticipate that the tower will shortly fall."

"What have you done to correct this?"

"You don't understand," said Watchman. "The refrigeration tapes were shut off at my command."

"The tower goes too?"

"The tower goes too."

Aghast, Fileclerk said, "What madness have you let loose in the world today?"

"The blessing of Krug has been withdrawn. His creatures have declared their independence."

"With an orgy of destruction?"

"With a program of planned repudiation of slavery, yes," Watchman said.

Fileclerk shook his head. "This is not the way. This is not the way! Are you all insane? Is reason dead among you? We were on the verge of winning the sympathies of the humans. Now, without warning, you smash everything—you create a perpetual war between android and human—"

"Which we will win," said Watchman. "We outnumber them. We are stronger, man for man. We control the weapons and the instruments of communication and transportation."

"Why must you do this?"

"There is no choice, Alpha Fileclerk. We placed our faith in Krug and Krug spurned our hopes. Now we strike back. Against those who mocked us. Against those who used us. Against him who made us. And we injure him where he is most vulnerable by bringing down the tower."

Fileclerk looked past Watchman, toward the tower. Watchman turned also. The sway seemed perceptible to the eye, now.

Hoarsely Fileclerk said, "It's not too late to turn on the refrigeration again, is it? Won't you listen to reason? There was no need for this revolt. We could have come to terms with them. Watchman, Watchman, how can someone of your intelligence be such a

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fanatic? Will you wreck the world because your god has forsaken you?"

"I would like you to leave now," Watchman said.

"No. Guarding this tower is my responsibility. We hold a contract." Fileclerk looked at the androids gathered in a loose circle around them. "Friends!" he called. "Alpha Watchman has gone mad! He is destroying the tower! I ask for your help! Seize him, restrain him, while I enter the control center and restore the refrigeration! Hold him back or the tower will fall!"

None of the androids moved.

Watchman said, "Take him away, friends."

They closed in. "No," Fileclerk cried. "Listen to me! This is insanity! This is irrationality! This is—"

A MUFFLED sound came from the middle of the group. Watchman smiled and started to return to the control center. Lilith said, "What will they do to him?"

"I have no idea. Kill him, perhaps. The voice of reason is always stifled in times like these," Watchman said. He studied the tower. It had begun distinctly to lean toward the east. Clouds of steamy vapor were rising from the tundra. He could make out bubbles in the mud on the side where the tapes were pumping heat into the permafrost. A bank of fog was forming not far above the ground, where the Arctic chill clashed with the warmth rising out of the tundra. Watchman was able to hear rumbling noises in the earth and strange sucking sounds of mud pulling free from mud. What was the tower's deviation from the perpendicular, he wondered? Two degrees? Three? How far must it list before the center of gravity shifted and the whole thing ripped itself out of the ground?

"Look," Lilith said suddenly.

Another figure had stumbled out of the transmat: Manuel Krug. He wore the costume of an alpha but his garments were torn and bloodstained and the skin showing through the rents was marked by deep cuts. Manuel barely appeared aware of the intense cold. He rushed toward them, wild-eyed, distraught.

"Lilith? Thor? Oh, Thank God! I've been everywhere trying to find a friendly face. Has the world gone crazy?"

"You should dress more warmly in this latitude," said Watchman calmly.

"What does that matter? Listen, where's my father? Our androids ran wild. Clissa's dead. They raped her. Hacked her up. I just barely got away. And wherever I go—Thor, what's happening? What's happening?"

"They should not have harmed your wife," Watchman said. "I offer my regrets. Such a thing was unnecessary."

"She was their friend," Manuel said. "Gave money secretly to the AEP, did you know that? And—and—good God, I'm losing my mind. The tower doesn't look straight." He blinked and pressed his thumbs into his eyeballs several times. "Still seems to be sagging. Tipped way over? How can that be? No. No. Crazy in the head. God help me. But at least you're here. Lilith? Lilith?" He reached

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for her. He was trembling convulsively. "I'm so cold, Lilith. Please hold me. Take me away somewhere. Just the two of us. I love you, Lilith. I love you, I love you, I love you. All that I have left now—"

He reached for her.

She eluded his grasp. He clutched air. Swinging free of him, she thrust herself at Watchman, pressing her body tightly against his. Watchman enfolded her in his arms. He smiled triumphantly. His hands ran down her sleek, supple body, testing the tautness of back and buttocks. His lips sought for hers. His tongue plunged into her warm mouth.

"Lilith!" Manuel shrieked.

Watchman felt an overwhelming tremor of sensuality. His body was aflame; every nerve-ending throbbed; he was fully awake to his manhood now. Lilith was quicksilver in his arms. Her breasts, her thighs, her loins, blazed against him. He was only dimly aware of Manuel's baleful croaking.

"The tower!" Manuel bellowed. "The tower!"

Watchman let go of Lilith. Pivoting, he faced the tower, body flexed, expectant. From the earth there came a terrible grinding noise. There came sucking sounds of gurgling mud. The tundra rippled and bubbled. He heard a cracking sound and thought of toppling trees. The tower leaned. The tower leaned. The tower leaned. The reflector plates cast a shimmering stream of brightness along its eastern face. Within, the communications equipment was plainly visible, seeds in the pod. The tower leaned. At its base, on the western side, huge mounds of icy soil were being thrust up, reaching almost to the entrance of the control center. There came snapping sounds, as of the breaking of violin strings. The tower leaned. There was a squishing, sliding sound—how many tons of glass were rocking on their foundations now? What mighty joints were yielding in the earth? The androids, standing in massed rows out of harm's way, were desperately making the sign of Krug-preserve-us—the muttered hum of their prayers cut through the eerie noises out of the pit. Manuel was sobbing. Lilith gasped and moaned in a way he had heard twice before when she had lain beneath him in the final frenzies of her orgasm. Watchman himself was serene. The tower leaned.

Now it tumbled. Air rushed wildly past Watchman, displaced by that falling bulk, and nearly threw him down. The base of the tower barely seemed to move at all while the midsection changed its angle of thrust in a leisurely way and the unfinished summit described a sudden fierce arc as it sped wildly toward the ground. Down and down and down it came. Its falling was encapsulated in a moment outside time—Watchman could separate each phase of the collapse from the one before, as if he were viewing a series of individual images. Down. Down. The air whined and screeched. It had a scorched smell. The tower was striking, not all at once but in sections, striking and rebounding and landing again, breaking up, sending immense gouts of mud flying, hurling its own shattered blocks

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for great distances. The climax of the toppling appeared to last for many minutes as humps of glass wall rose and fell, so that the tower seemed to writhe like a giant wounded snake. Finally all was still. Crystalline fragments lay sprawled across hundreds of meters. The androids had their heads bowed in prayer. Manuel was crouched dismally at Lilith's feet, cheek against her right shin. Lilith stood with her legs far apart, her shoulders flung back, her breasts heaving—she glowed in the aftermath of ecstasy. Watchman, a short distance from her, felt wondrously calm, though he sensed the first taint of sadness entering his jubilation now that the tower was down. He pulled Lilith close to him.

A MOMENT later Simeon Krug emerged from one of the transmats. Watchman had expected that. Krug shaded his eyes with his hand, as though warding off some dazzling glare, and looked around. He peered at the place where the tower had risen. He glanced at the hushed, huddled gangs of androids. He stared for a long while at the immense stretch of sleek rubble. At last he turned toward Thor Watchman.

"How did this happen?" Krug asked quietly, his voice under rigid control.

"The refrigeration tapes ceased to function properly. The permafrost thawed."

"We had a dozen redundancy overrides to prevent such a thing."

"I overrode the overrides," said Watchman.

"You?"

"I felt a sacrifice was needed."

Krug's eerie calmness did not desert him. "This is the way you repay me, Thor? I gave you life. I'm your father, in a way. I denied you something that you wanted and so you smashed my tower. Eh? Eh? What sense did that make, Thor?"

"It made sense."

"Not to me," Krug said. He laughed bitterly. "But of course I'm only a god. Gods don't always understand the ways of mortals."

"Gods can fail their people," Watchman said. "You failed us."

"It was your tower too! You gave a year of your life to it, Thor! I know how you loved it. I was inside your head, remember? And yet—and yet you—"

Krug broke off, sputtering, coughing.

Watchman took Lilith's hand. "We should go, now. We've done what we came to do here. We'll return to Stockholm and join the others."

Together they walked around the silent, motionless Krug and headed toward the transmat bank. Watchman switched one of the transmats on. The field was pure green, the right color—things must have returned to order at the transmat headquarters.

He reached out to set the coordinates. As he did so he heard Krug's anguished roar.

"Watchman!"

The android looked behind him. Krug stood a few meters from the transmat cubicle. His face was red and distorted with rage, jaws working, eyes narrowed, heavy creases running through the cheeks. His hands clawed the air. In a sudden

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furious lunge Krug seized Watchman's arm and pulled him from the transmat.

Krug seemed to be searching for words. He found none. After a moment's confrontation he lashed out, slapping Watchman's face. It was a powerful blow but Watchman made no attempt to return it. Krug hit him again, this time with clenched fist. Watchman backed toward the transmat.

Making a thick, strangled sound deep in his throat, Krug rushed forward. He caught Watchman by the shoulders and began to shake him frantically. Watchman was astounded by the ferocity of Krug's movements. Krug kicked him; he spat; he dug his nails deep into Watchman's flesh. Watchman tried to separate himself from Krug. Krug's head battered itself in frenzy against Watchman's chest. It would not be hard to hurl Krug aside, Watchman knew. But he could not do it.

He could not raise his hand to Krug.

In the fury of his onslaught Krug had pushed Watchman nearly to the edge of the transmat field. Watchman glanced uneasily over his shoulder. He had not set any coordinates—the field was open, a conduit to nowhere. If he or Krug happened to fall into it now—

"Thor!" Lilith called. "Look out!"

The green glow licked at him. Krug, a meter shorter than he was, continued to ram and thrust. It was time to bring the struggle to an end, Watchman knew. He put his hands on Krug's thick arms and shifted his balance, preparing to hurl his attacker to the ground.

But this is Krug, he thought. *But this is Krug.*

Thor Watchman could not bring himself to strike Krug.

Now Krug let go of him. Puzzled, Watchman sucked his breath and attempted to brace himself. Krug came charging forward, shouting, screaming. Watchman accepted the thrust of Krug's attack. Krug's shoulder crashed into Watchman's chest. Once again the android found an event encapsulating itself in a moment outside time. He drifted backward as though freed of gravity, moving timelessly, with infinite slowness. The green transmat field surged up to engulf him. Dimly he heard Lilith's scream—dimly he heard Krug's cry of triumph. Gently, easily, serenely, Watchman tumbled into the green glow, making the sign of Krug-preserve-us as he disappeared.

KRUG clings to the side of the transmat cubicle, panting, shivering. He has checked his momentum just in time—another step or two and he would have followed Thor Watchman into the field. He rests a moment. Then he steps back. He turns.

The tower lies in ruins. Thousands of androids stand like statues. The alpha woman Lilith Meson lies face down on the thawing tundra, sobbing. A dozen meters away Manuel kneels, a sorry figure, bloodstained, mudspattered, his clothing in rags, his eyes empty, his face slack.

Krug feels a great sense of peace. His spirit soars. He is free from all bondage. He walks toward Manuel.

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"Up," he says. "Get up."

Manuel continues to kneel. Krug scoops him up, gripping his armpits and holds him until he stands of his own strength.

Krug says, "You're in charge now. I leave you everything. Lead the resistance, Manuel. Take control. Work toward restoring order. You're the top man. You're Krug. Do you understand me, Manuel? As of this moment I abdicate."

Manuel smiles. Manuel coughs. Manuel looks at the muddy ground.

"It's all yours, boy. I know you can manage. Things may look bleak today but that's only temporary. You've got an empire now, Manuel. For you. For Clissa. For your children."

Krug embraces his son. Then he goes to the transmats. He selects the coordinates for the vehicle-assembly center in Denver.

Thousands of androids are there, although no one seems to be working. They stare at Krug in paralyzed astonishment. He moves swiftly through the place.

"Where's Alpha Fusion?" he demands. "Has anyone seen him?"

Romulus Fusion appears. He looks stunned by the sight of Krug. Krug gives him no chance to speak.

"Where's the starship?" he asks at once.

"At the spacefield," the alpha says, stumbling.

"Take me there."

Romulus Fusion's lips move hesitantly, as though he wants to tell Krug that there has been a revolution, that Krug is no longer the master, that his orders have ceased to carry weight. But Alpha Fusion says none of those things. He merely nods.

He conducts Krug to the starship. There it stands, as before, alone on the broad pad.

"Is it ready to go?" Krug asks.

"We would have given it the Earth-orbit flight-test three days from now, sir."

"No time for testing now. Immediate blastoff for interstellar voyage. We'll run it on automatic. Crew of one. Tell the ground station to program the ship for its intended final destination, as discussed earlier. Maximum velocity."

Romulus Fusion nods again. He moves as though in a dream. "I will convey your instructions," he says.

"Good. Get things going fast."

The alpha trots off the field. Krug enters the ship, closing and sealing the hatch behind him. The image of the planetary nebula NGC 7293 in Aquarius sizzles in his mind, emitting brilliant pulsing light, poisonous light that clangs like a gong in the heavens. *Krug is coming*, he says to himself. *Wait. Wait for me, you up there! Krug is coming to talk to you. Somehow. There'll be a way. Even if your sun gives off fire that bakes my bones when I'm ten light-years away. Krug is coming to talk to you.*

He walks through the ship. Everything is in order.

He does not activate his screens for a last view of Earth—Krug has turned his back on Earth. He knows that if he looks out, he will see the fires that are blazing in every city tonight and he does not

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want to see them—the only fire that concerns him now is that fiery ring in Aquarius. Earth is something he has bequeathed to Manuel.

Krug removes his clothing. Krug lies down in one of the freezer units of the life-suspension system. He is ready to depart. He does not know how long the voyage will last, nor if he will find anything at the end of it. But they have left him no choice. He gives himself over completely to his machines, to his starship.

Krug waits.

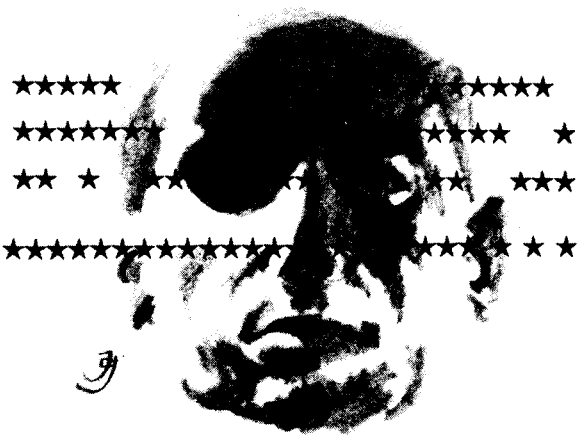
Will they obey him in this last command?

Krug waits.

The glass cover of the freezer unit suddenly slides into place, sealing him in. Krug smiles. Now he feels the coolant fluid trickling in—he hisses as it touches his flesh. It rises about him. Yes. Yes. The voyage will soon begin. Krug will go to the stars. Outside, the cities of Earth are ablaze. That other fire draws him, the gong in the heavens.

Krug is coming! Krug is coming!

The coolant fluid nearly covers his body now. He is sinking into lethargy—his body suspends its throbbing, his fevered brain grows calm. He has never been so fully relaxed before. Phantoms dance through his mind: Clissa, Manuel, Thor, the tower, Manuel, the tower, Thor, Clissa. Then they are gone and he sees only the fiery ring of NGC 7293. That, too, begins to fade. He scarcely is breathing now. Sleep is taking him. He will not feel the blastoff. Five kilometers away a handful of perversely faithful androids are talking to a computer; they are sending Krug to the stars. He waits. Now he sleeps. The cold fluid engulfs him completely. Krug is at peace. He departs forever from Earth. He begins his journey at last. ★



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 (Continued from page 14)

"I do," replied Forbes. "And Ganeth Zerl, the Yansis premier."

THAT evening one paper, the *Times-Standard*, broke the story of the war-settlement tournament. As a result my telephone was busy with calls for information about the player who had masterminded it and who had broken the records at Yellow Silence.

At nine o'clock the next morning I drove again through the gates of the new course. Judging by the number of cars in the parking area a goodly number of people had seen the *Times-Standard* story.

Ganeth Zerl was waiting on the first tee when I joined the gallery. How different was this Yansis, I thought, from his predecessors of twenty years before when, smiling in pseudo-friendship, they had emerged from their spacecraft and stepped for the first time on the soil of Earth. He was tall, a saturnine individual clad in loose-fitting green coveralls and the latest style sports boots, polished to the nines. His wafer head, a sensitive subject to most of his race, was uncovered and thrust out in surly defiance.

The gallery moved back obediently as Zerl selected a heavy wood with a gyroscopic bang-plate and teed off. His ball shot out a thousand yards over the fairway and came to a bounding stop as a robot caddy ran out to mark the distance.

Forbes' ball also split the fairway.

And now an indefinable strangeness seemed to settle over the two players. The gallery sensed it and followed them in silence. With apparent ease Zerl took the first, second and third holes. His eyes began to glitter.

But Forbes came back to win the sixth and seventh.

At the tenth Zerl's ball sliced into the rough and the magnetic grass wrapped itself about it, forming a nest that defied disentanglement. Right away the Yansis player demanded permission to drop another ball on the grounds that the obstacle was not a natural one.

Forbes took the eleventh with a double-fulcrum approach that reached the green beautifully.

The game went on.

Over the emerald grass, past water hazards and sand traps they went, oblivious to the milling spectators, pausing only to wait for the hushed conversation to die down. A film of perspiration gathered on their brows; they wiped their hands repeatedly.

I was witnessing, I suddenly realized, no mere tournament but a struggle between elemental forces for the highest of stakes—for a race against genocide. As I gazed into the wan sunlight which had

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supplanted the overcast I got the impression that we weren't on the links at all but in a great rotunda where sat a hundred or more judges in black robes.

It was even-up as they climbed to the eighteenth tee. Both drove with the utmost care and precision.

And then a sudden murmur of excitement swept through the gallery. Forbes' ball had been driven directly into the *Flux*.

The *Flux*—Robinson's Dervish—was a hazard I had never seen before. Legal under NGA rules but seldom used, it consisted of a dimensional whirling cone that sprang into existence when the ball entered its field. It was also a miniature timeslide, a viewport into the problematical future.

Forbes' jaw set as he made his way down to the whirling cone in which the air appeared to be staggered in faults, one over the other. He hesitated only long enough to select a club. Then, as if he were merely passing through a doorway into another room, he stepped into the *Flux*.

The staggered air enveloped him and he disappeared. As I stood gazing, I was momentarily aware of a great rush of matter, blurred and amorphous, hurtling by. It—became a procession of people, like the view of a parade from the window of a speeding train, all of them in jubilation and in ecstasy. At the parade's end stretched an open field upon which were piled articles of ordnance and armament—all being scrapped and destroyed by atomic fire.

The scene faded. Moments passed. Then Forbes' ball came bounding out of the *Flux* and an instant later he followed. But even as the ball sailed past me I saw that it was overclubbed. It flew across into the rough flanking the opposite fairway.

Forbes had lost.

A wave of disappointment swept over me.

Yet I saw an expression of triumph enter his eyes as he completed his anti-climactic play on the eighteenth green and fed his scorecard into the slot. He entered the Balance-beam after turning the control to reverse, then stepped out again. He climbed slowly partway up the ramp, where he stood facing the silent, expectant gallery.

"My friends," he said in his melodious voice, "you may think what you have just seen is failure for Earth. In reality it is victory. Man's inability to understand and appreciate the thought and viewpoint of another life, no matter how alien that life may be has always been a stumbling block in the progress of his culture."

He paused and smiled slightly.

"You see, the very acceptance by one culture of peace with another culture by way of amicable competition constitutes a victory in itself. And the ability to accept defeat in such a culture-contest may

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also be regarded as a triumph."

"And now the tournament is finished. I have enjoyed my stay with you but I must leave."

He made a gesture of farewell, turned and strode down the ramp. He headed diagonally across the fairways. I watched his figure grow smaller and smaller, moving over the bright green sward toward the hazard lake that lay athwart his path. But for some reason he did not turn either way along the shore. Instead, as the water cast a haze of reflection in my eyes, I fancied I saw him move directly forward, walk out on its wind-rippled surface. ★

THE MOON OF THIN REALITY

(Continued from page 55)

fires the destruct. It'll make a flash they'll see all over the shell."

McKay was alarmed to note how strong was the impulse to accept the excuse. Get too close to the guys you fly with and you find yourself trading authority for a support that may not always be there. He forced himself to greater anger.

"The reason they need the message is that there's going to be no destruct. Now get that signal out."

"No destruct?" said Slazeck, appalled. "But Mac—Kiliath's been aching to send the pulse for days, before the aliens get to thinking the ship's a threat."

"It is a threat. If I'd been sure the aliens were watching I'd have put a missile into the wreck after our burn to make our good intentions quite clear. As it stands, we have to look out for our own survival."

"I don't get you, Mac. That shell may be populated to the density of terrestrial cities and the impact's going to be in the megaton range."

McKay was dropping his bombshell in more senses than one. "Until I see evidence of it I won't believe the shell is inhabited at all. I'm trying to communicate on the most elementary level with whatever devices are regulating the m-t fields, devices which obviously aren't capable of sophisticated communication. If they don't stop the derelict they'll get a damage report. And maybe they'll respond to the next warning ahead of time."

"Mac, you can't do this—"

"Now hear this. When the derelict hits the shell, after due broadcast warning from us, this ship is going to be closed up in full combat alert for whatever reaction there may be from the shell. If there isn't any—we will start beaming the same warnings to our

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own impact point and if they fail we stream our missile armament in line ahead and try to blast through. And we're all of us going to snap to for it—including me, because I failed to realize how far we'd slipped in the last weeks. I want this ship and its crew checked out and at full readiness when things start happening, beginning right now. Get that signal out. Let's go."

THEY accepted it. McKay was relieved. He had no wish to be the last man alive or conscious when the RLV hurtled up to the shell—yet a show of mutiny might have led to that. He would not have backed from a fight.

It was just as well that the tension and the inactivity had come to a head before the crisis. Even after it, McKay was alarmed at how long it took to square up the ship. Talk, not action, had become the habit of the mission. At the end of his sleep period Kiliath was horrified to learn what was happening. The Furtherance race were very idealistic—for their job they had to be. McKay insisted on continuing the systems check—unnecessary for the ship but vital to get the crew back in shape. He refused to argue the moral issue and, further estranged behind the computer translation, Kiliath had to subside.

The impact however was an anticlimax. The wreck struck in one great burst of brilliant white, momentarily infusing the patterns around—the shell threw very little of that rare energy back toward the sun but swallowed it instantly. Later, when they studied the flash, they found little new detail. The RLV was at full combat alert, ready for retribution to leap up at them or at least the contact that now must surely come.

But once again—nothing.

"Okay," said McKay grimly. "Contact and warning program to our point of impact. They can't possibly miss the point."

Devlin shot him a glance but obeyed in silence. Nobody commented on this drastic strategy, though the air was pregnant with moral evaluation. There was no way to tell what damage or death they had wrought on the shell—should they, nobly, have destroyed both ships to prevent it? McKay was damned if he would.

About their own impending impact there was no debate. McKay was determined and that was that. Were the inhabitants—if any—trying frantically to communicate by what they thought the obvious channels? Or were they sunk in apathy or indifference? One thing McKay was sure of—without some recognition from the shell, he wouldn't contemplate destroying the ship.

"Missiles ready," he said, moments from impact.

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The RLV was not armed for major combat but he would try to blast through. He launched in line all their missiles—two with nuclear warheads, four conventional, a shoal of antis—and slowed up from them. There would be time to observe the effects before the ship hit. Perhaps if the missiles weakened the shell enough—no telling how thick it was—the RLV could burn tail-first through the wreckage, though he thought it would be moving much too fast—

And a great starfield opened ahead of them, rich and incredibly brilliant, and the missiles fell out of the blackness into it. Down fell the RLV after them, as it seemed into the treasure-house of the galaxy. This Interface had been set up without reference to the ship's equipment, still inert—it was the work of the shell alone. Like the opening of a great fan the starry heavens swept up around them and the black disc of the Interface snapped shut.

"My God we did it," Devlin exclaimed, the release of tension outstanding in his voice. "We forced them into it."

For a moment McKay feared they had simply been passed through the shell to recede helplessly in space as perhaps they deserved—but the instruments answered him. The black sphere astern was not the outside of the shell but the far side of the moon. The position of their Interface in relation to the relay satellite had been recreated by the transmitters on the shell—so had the shell's intelligence known everything all along? Already the Earth was coming into view. They had in effect flown right through the moon—it was impossible not to think of the vaster sphere as hidden somewhere within it.

So in the end had there been life on the shell—or was their deliverance a defensive reflex of the great artifact, running down unattended in the fading infrared? There would be only one way ever perhaps to find out—but there lay the Earth, still a world intact, and Mc Kay knew he would never deliberately run an Interface into the lunar surface again. ★

SHIP ME TOMORROW

(Continued from page 26)

publicity? He sat down, mumbling polite greetings to the polite Miss Susan.

"And how may Femmikin International help you, Mr. Ellison?"

Give me a dream.
Box up a fantasy for me.
Fabricate a longing-saturator.
Ship me tomorrow.
And give me whatever it is you

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must give to make all of us believe it's real. That has got to be part of their package.

George Ellison opened his mouth and began to tell the femmikin things he had never told anyone.

And then he gave her his credit card. The blue creditor on the desk went *beep* and smiling Miss Susan handed back the card. He put it into his wallet and went out. He nodded automatically at the femmikin at the desk but did not look in the face of the man standing in front of her with a executive case in his hands. He went out through the plush wooden doors and across the torn up street and down Warchief towards the monorail station.

He felt purged.

And excited.

And sad, as if he had been caught doing something a little dirty.

Expect delivery no later than the twenty-eighth of next month, she had said in the nice smooth voice of Femmikin International and Femmikin International didn't lie.

George Ellison felt empty. An empty wine glass to soon be filled.

But with what? ★

GALAXY BOOKSHELF

(Continued from page 29)

and the subsequent marketing of those products.

Which brings us to Compton's only true innovation in this book. The society he depicts is a future society we may very well believe in —one in which it is an accepted matter of course that all students are revolutionaries, and one in which ideological disagreement is often expressed in assassination. Meanwhile, the wheels of the marketing establishment continue to turn, because even revolutionaries aspire to the affluent life depicted in the media.

Only Compton, thus far, has moved toward a depiction of what intellectual life will be like under those conditions. What he does with it at this present juncture is very little, laced with smatterings from *1984* undigested, and with that great scene in which a computer decides it's God . . . as if it had never heard of science fiction or of D.G. Compton—an unlikely proposition.

MAKE no mistake about it—antiestablishmentarianism is bred in our bones. Political expressions of it are mere expressions; what sane intelligent organism can help but resent the necessity to emerge from the womb and set about some ridiculous prescribed exercise whose only reward is subsistence

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toward the tomb? Which exercise it is is a mere matter of detail; whatever Simple Simon says is basically hateful.

But of course we get along, as time goes by--the real rebels are weeded out before they ever get to Second Grade. Still, the outrage is well remembered, and nurtured, as time goes by—and kept in a secret place, out of need and in case of opportunity. That, and that alone, suffices to explain the worldwide popularity of Tarzan and his many cousins. That, and that alone, suffices to explain why it might strike a writer as a great notion to go through the intellectual exercise of proving that Tarzan won't work.

Lord Tyger, by Philip José Farmer (Doubleday, $5.95) may be such a book—it says it is—or it may in fact be a reaffirmation of the greatest faith (I think it is, and I suspect Farmer thinks so, too). In any event, it is an entertaining, rich, inventive adventure novel in the best sense, with its most lyrical passages far surpassing any effect Edgar Rice Burroughs was ever able to achieve, and approaching the effect that *The Jungle Book* has on small boys.

What it says it is is a novel about the central figure in an elaborate hoax—a modern child of English nobility who is kidnapped by an immensely rich maniac and raised from infancy in a sequestered part of Africa by people who are paid to say they're apes. This synthetically derived noble savage, usually called Ras Tyger, then proceeds to blow up the whole mechanism, in part because it is already suffering from incursions of outside reality, such as jet planes and the fact that real apes can't raise human children, in part because he is a noble savage superman whose personality will not abide incursions, and in part because the author's first intention was to have it work out that way.

I'll work back to what I mean by that, starting from here:

All writing consists of arranging a systematic lie so as to achieve a resemblance to truth. This is somewhat more particularly true of fiction than it is of what is called, revealingly, nonfiction. On the other hand, attempting to lie successfully about something the reader knows isn't factually true is a tricky business. It takes more native wit to do that than it does to just give the facts in a plausible order.

Consequently, most fiction—even most good fiction, by "good" writers—proceeds along the level of suspended disbelief, with the reader constantly aware that he is watching a construction, and admiring it on its merits as a construction. You can see this in children watching cartoons on TV, calling the plot turns in advance, and applauding the creator for having come up with the expected turn at the proper time.

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Most science-fiction writers, like most writers, write on this level. All writers, without exception, must include this level in their work, if only to create further effects beyond it. It is on this level that we can see, I think, Farmer's intention to set about proving that Ras Tyger would overpower Boygur the maniac, for all of Boygur's money and connections. (I am *not* going even to think very much about the possibilities of a scholarly essay on Farmer's various levels of symbology).

Some writers, including some science-fiction writers, write habitually in such a way that this level does become mere underpinning. Farmer is one of these; a crotchety, difficult man who accepts praise for the wrong things but denies blame of the same kind, and a general all-around secret harborer of thoughts in bad taste which emerge triumphant in his books. What counts about him is that he is an artist (and *Lord Tyger* offers excellent proof of this) because he does, indeed, by preference and nature work on what we can call the level of enforced belief—or, if you need another way of describing the distinction between the constructionist and the artist, on the level of faith.

Ras Tyger lives. It's as simple as that. It may be that Farmer's achievement is in some way made less by the fact that he is only telling us the same thing Burroughs told us and for which we made him at least as wealthy and powerful as Farmer made Boygur. But a piece of art is not only inexhaustible, it is infinite; you can knock hunks off Farmer's achievements all day—and you probably should; the need may well be inherent in their nature—but you cannot diminish it. *Lord Tyger* is not on the face of it a major novel, but it lives, it still moves. ★

Starting next issue in GALAXY

I WILL FEAR NO EVIL

Robert A. Heinlein

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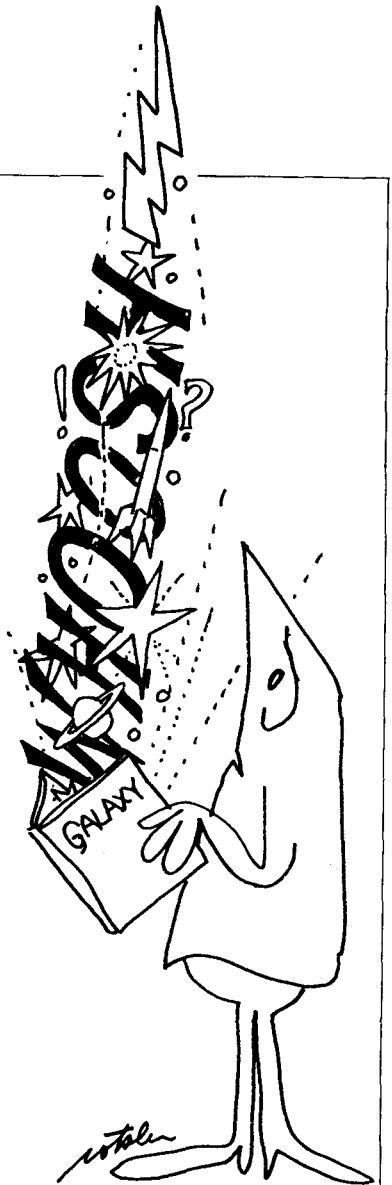
★★ GALAXY STARS ★★

Me? I've been a rancher, a sculptor, a photographer of nude ladies, a motion-picture director, a cartoonist; and now, it seems, I'm a writer. My enemies, if any, would call me a dilettante —my friends, a Renaissance Man. What it amounts to is that I like to do different things and can, and as soon as I get halfway good at something I go try something else. I've never formally studied what I've worked at professionally, although once I did go to art school.

My view is that life should not be played on one note. I try to make it a symphony. I also laugh a lot. I've completed, but not yet published, a book of poetry written in my own blood and a children's book that Tim Kirk is illustrating.

I live atop a Hollywood hill in a harem tent floored with "sleeping silks and furs." My TV set floats over a Don Simpson light show. In the garage is a Roman orgy room, complete with sunken tub.

My chief interests are science fiction, archeology, the preservation—or rather, the improvement—of ecology. I like Corvettes, steak, making movies, beautiful women who are also intelligent, and I'm the greatest cinema fan there is. I'm a Jeffersonian liberal, a fast draw, a Romantic, and believe there are too many damn people in the world. We need "better"—not "more."



William Rotsler, whose Ship Me Tomorrow appears in this issue, contributes the profile at left and one of his famous "Rotslers," above.—THE EDITORS

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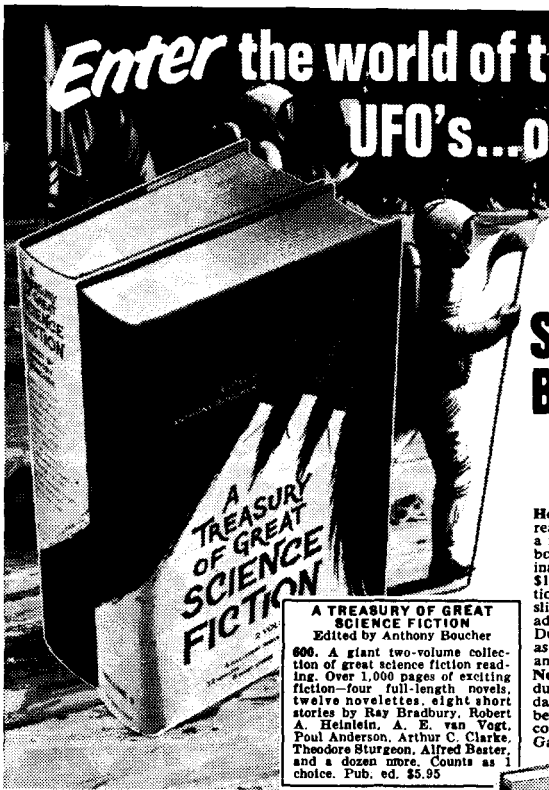

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